

The King of Shadows

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Author: hollowsong16

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Summary: A What-If story that branches off the beginning of 'King of Pride' Arc 4. Here we see how different Subaru and Emilia's lives could have been if they had made only one different decision

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1**

Hey guys. So this was just a quick little project I through together for April Fool's. I say quick because it was SUPPOSED to be quick and then I ended up spending three or four months working on it and it ballooned from 20k to 190k words. This is a What If story based off the King of Pride fanfiction (s/13807270/1/Re-Zero-The-King-of-Pride). This is not a 'Dark Subaru' fic specifically, this is just an Omake where Subaru and Emilia made some different choices during Arc 4 and some different things happened. I'd really have to recommend that you read King of Pride first as I don't spend much time trying to ground new readers to this story.

Anyway. Our adventure starts with meeting an old friend...

A very long time ago, at a small table, perched high atop a grassy knoll, a beautiful woman with long white hair was reading a large white book. She was dressed in black from head to toe. Her eyes were dark and her flawless face was cast in a sardonic smile.

A small girl wearing an elaborate pink dress marched up the hill with a serious expression on her face.

"Mother," Beatrice asked. "What are you doing?"

Echidna glanced up at Beatrice for a moment then returned her attention to the book. "I'm contemplating the vagaries of this existence. The perplexing nature of a clockwork universe where the mighty stream of time can be completely rerouted by the ripples of a single perfectly tossed pebble."

Beatrice blanched. She glanced away, a look of intense concentration on her face as she searched her memory for something that would help her decipher this obtuse statement. "Betty has also considered this!" Beatrice said desperately.

"Oh?" Echidna said in a tone of amusement as she turned a page in her book.

"Yes! Betty was just considering this... thing, in fact," Beatrice asserted. "Perhaps Betty could help Betty's mother in her research!"

Echidna chuckled. "I don't normally require assistance, Beatrice," Echidna said carelessly, turning a page.

Beatrice's face fell.

"Still, I suppose another pair of eyes might be useful," Echidna continued.

Beatrice's face lit up. "Betty is *proud* to help Betty's mother research the... um, err," Beatrice voice trailed off. She gave a weak cough. "Perhaps Betty's mother could explain... how far she's gotten in researching this... thing?" Beatrice suggested awkwardly.

The Witch of Greed's face fell into an amused expression. "As I said, I was ruminating on how baffling it is that the mighty force of time should be so strangely fragile. Time is a great river, flowing to some unimaginable destiny. A river stronger and wider than any we have ever beheld. And yet, change just *one* tiny thing in its stream and the river can jump its banks and flow in an entirely new direction. What manner of river can be dammed and rerouted by the tossing of a single pebble?"

Beatrice looked awkward. It was clear that she did not understand what her Mother was talking about and was desperately trying to avoid admitting to this.

Echidna smirked. "'Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: it might have been.' My precious Book," Echidna continued. "Shows not merely the past,

present, and the fluid images of the future but the flickering shadows of what *might* have been. It always fascinates me how lives *could* have otherwise been because of the smallest decision a person might make..."

Elsa stood in the doorway of the church, wearing a formfitting outfit. Her cleavage window reached down to her navel. She wore tights and a red cape was draped behind her.

Elsa smiled calmly. "Your friends were most amusing to play with, Princess. They did *not* want to tell me where you were."

Anri's eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape that wasn't there.

Anri drew herself up imperiously. The girl forced her mouth into a grim line. "Look, if you were expecting me to *beg* for my life, Elsa, then I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you," Anri snarled even as tears streamed from her eyes. "I'll show you how a princess can die!"

"Oh good!" Elsa said approvingly. "This should be fun! I don't get to fondle young entrails like yours very often. I'm sure that they'll be most soft and supple. I'm very curious as to what color they'll be."

Anri's face remained defiant but her cheeks were ashen.

"Princess! Run away!" Victoire shouted, drawing a short sword from her belt and sprinting to stand in front of Anri. "I'll hold this cunt off!"

Elsa smiled kindly at Victoire.

Emilia's mind went blank as Anri rushed over to her, the princess throwing her arms around Emilia and trembling. Elsa's appearance was a literal nightmare, in some ways the thought of facing her was worse than the thought of encountering a Snow Blight or even the Black Snake.

Elsa slashed at Victoire with her long daggers and sent her crashing back against the wall next to Emilia. Victoire had a massive gash across her stomach.

Emilia froze. Unable to move, to think, or to do anything useful.

Elsa simpered as she slowly walked over to Emilia and Anri.

Elsa sprang at them, blades extended and a gleeful smile on face.

Victoire's smug expression broke into a shock as she realized that Elsa was aiming for Anri and not Emilia.

Victoire leaped to her feet and knocked Elsa back with her bare hands.

Elsa staggered back several steps and then regained her balance. She looked delighted. "Oh my! You *do* have some fight in you!" She exclaimed, examining Victoire with renewed interest.

"Stay back, Princess!" Victoire shouted.

Anri and Emilia drew back from the circling combatants.

Part of Emilia screamed at her that Subaru needed her and that she needed to confront Elsa to keep him safe. Emilia suddenly realized that she could finally step up and protect Subaru for once.

She thought that she could finally prove to everyone that she was more than just a helpless girl that needed Subaru to take care of her.

But only for a moment.

Emilia knew that she was no hero, that facing Elsa would certainly kill her, and that she had no hope at all of keeping Subaru safe.

At least not by fighting.

Emilia made a decision.

"Come on," Emilia whispered to Anri, pulling the girl into the hall.

Emilia's last view of the kitchen was of Elsa trying to slash Victoire and Victoire jumping away.

"What are we doing?!" Anri demanded.

Emilia sighed but she didn't slow down as they hurried into Subaru's room. "Anri, if we try to fight Elsa... we're just going to die..." Emilia said sadly as she picked up Subaru from the bed and bundled him up in blankets.

Anri bit her lip, looking miserable but she didn't argue. "But... what about Victoire?" She asked plaintively.

Emilia remembered Victoire with small kindness after all her sharp words and insults toward Emilia and Subaru. For a moment, Emilia realized that she didn't really care if the sharp tongued woman died. Then she shook off these unworthy thoughts. "She's buying time to protect you, Anri," Emilia explained. "If Elsa kills you, that sacrifice was for nothing. Make her sacrifice an act of honor by escaping and returning to your people," She urged.

Anri bowed her head, tears streaming down her face but she nodded.

The beautiful, sensual, enchanting, gorgeous, and passionate Capella Emerada Lugnica realized that she had a problem.

It wasn't her fault, of course. Her plan was nothing short of brilliant but as she dodged one of the slutty Elsa's slashing daggers, she was forced to admit that it was just possible that there was a *tiny* little flaw.

Late last night, Capella had left a message for Elsa in one of the Assassin Guild's many dead-drop sites. The message had told her that Anri was hiding at the church.

Capella had intended for that stupid hussy Elsa to show up at the church and kill the pustulent Subaru and his little elven slut. Then Capella would kill Elsa which would earn Anri's trust and gratitude as well as ensure that there was no one left but Capella for Anri to depend on. After that, Capella was confident that Anri would *have* to listen when Capella recommended that she open the Vault.

However, it was at least *technically* possible that Capella had miscalculated.

It wasn't her fault, of course. The basic plan was flawless. However, now that the pieces of her plan were in motion in front of her, it was trivial for an astounding mind like Capella Emerada Lugnica to realize that Elsa could not *recognize* the woman whom she was attacking as her benevolent mistress because of Capella's ingenious 'Victoire' disguise.

Capella had not informed Elsa of her presence in the church because she had no faith in the numb cunt's acting ability. If Capella had told Elsa that her scintillating patron was impersonating a Gusteko Operative named Victoire then Elsa would have acted differently around Capella, refusing to fight the immaculate goddess whom she had worshiped for all these years and Anri would have become suspicious.

Thus, it was clear to Capella that she had been entirely correct in her decision not to share this information with Elsa.

However, the extremely minor flaw in Capella's brilliant plan was this: Elsa was fixated on trying to kill *Victoire* rather than cutting up the contemptible Subaru and his stupid elven whore. Elsa seemed to be in no hurry to chase after Anri, being content to hunt her down later after Elsa had finished playing with her current opponent. Elsa was utterly confident that she could easily kill Anri at leisure since there was nowhere for her to run. The big-titted cow's stupidity was letting Capella down once again.

Capella could easily destroy Elsa in a split second. But the irony was that Capella had just realized that Victoire *couldn't* do that. If Victoire were to suddenly demonstrate enough strength, agility, or magic to deal with Elsa, then Anri would be suspicious of her suddenly mighty ally and the entire plan would be ruined.

As it was, the amazing Capella Emerada Lugnica was reduced to dodging knives while she attempted to use her remarkable brain to compensate for her tramp of a servant's stupidity.

Elsa's stupidity was genuinely overwhelming. Elsa had found a way to do exactly what the amazing Capella had told her to do and yet the plan was *still* ruined. How could Elsa have possibly screwed up *this* badly?

Elsa had already marked Capella with a dozen minor wounds in non-crippling places. Elsa wasn't trying to win the fight yet. She was still having fun and wanted to drag this out for as long as possible before finally cutting up her prey.

Capella's wounds weren't bleeding but Elsa hadn't noticed that yet.

As the minutes dragged on, Capella turned her incandescent brain toward finding a solution for all of Elsa's blunders in Capella's flawless plan but Elsa's stupidity was so profound that the remarkable Capella simply couldn't find a way to compensate for the plan going sideways.

As time passed and Elsa continued to stab and mock her, Capella got angrier and angrier.

Finally, Capella just couldn't stand it anymore.

Suddenly moving much faster than a normal human would be capable of, Capella placed her palm firmly against the startled Elsa's midsection and *pushed*.

Elsa went flying backwards, shooting out the church doorway and landing on her back outside, skidding through the mud. The fact that Elsa had flown *through* the open doorway as opposed to crashing hard against the Church wall and splattering like a rotten fruit, was mostly chance.

Elsa quickly got back to her feet and saw Victoire standing there, her face twisted in rage and her eyes absolutely insane.

With a thought, Capella mended the dozen or so knife-wounds dotting her body.

Elsa blanched. Elsa adored combat, the rush and frenzy of battle was her one true passion, unless one counted the torture and execution of her helpless victims afterward, but this woman had a strange power that reminded Elsa of Mother Capella. Elsa might love battle but she was no fool. Any power that reminded Elsa of Mother Capella was nothing to trifle with.

Elsa leaped to her feet and took off running.

Capella stormed after Elsa with a scowl on her face.

The changeling Capella had a thousand different forms that could easily catch up to Elsa and tear her to pieces. She was already in the process of shapeshifting into one of

them before she remembered that her ultimate goal was to cozen Anri into opening the Vault so she regretfully let her tramp of a minion escape for now. Capella took a moment to collect herself emotionally and get back into character as 'Victoire.' Then she went into the back of the church with a warm smile on her face.

"Princess?" She called. "We're safe now!"

Capella entered the room where the faggot Subaru had been resting only to discover that the bed was empty. The window was open and the curtains streamed in the wind.

The entire village of Iruk was awakened that morning by Capella's ear-splitting scream of fury.

Anri rode Patrasche to the north while Emilia sat behind her, holding Subaru in her arms.

Emilia had wanted to return to the forest and take shelter in the only safe place she'd ever known but Anri had immediately nixed this idea. Elsa was a talented and skilled tracker and the elven village was their very last point of refuge. They needed to throw off pursuit before they went back there.

Thus, they rode toward a town in Gusteko called Stoneybrooke. Anri had visited it once and it was even possible that Anri could find some of her scattered bodyguards there.

"Mili, how's Subaru doing?" Anri asked as Patrasche raced across the flat ground.

Emilia looked incredulous. "You're asking *me*?!" Emilia protested.

"Well, I'm a little busy right now to inspect him," Anri grumbled, guiding Patrasche.

"But how in the world would I know how he's doing?!" Emilia asked helplessly.

"Is he feverish?! Is he shivering? Is he moaning in pain?" Anri snapped back.

Emilia quickly felt his forehead. "No. I don't... think so," Emilia answered in a small voice. "...Subaru will be fine, right?"

Anri didn't answer.

"Right?!" Emilia asked desperately. "We gave him the medicine!"

Anri sighed. "Well... Subaru should have had another dose of the medicine this morning but... I didn't have time to pack it before we fled. He seems to be doing OK but..."

Emilia bit her lip and held Subaru tighter as if to stop him from slipping away from her.

Subaru drifted in a strange world suspended between sleep and waking. He found himself in a large clearing in a forest full of mist. The clearing was simply a flat expanse of gray mist under a bright sun that struggled to shine through the fog. The clearing was fenced by a ring of low shrubs and ferns that were all exactly the same size and shape. The forest trees were distant shadows, standing in the mist.

Something bothered Subaru about the area but it took him a moment to put it together.

All of those ferns look exactly alike. There's no dirt or bugs on any of the fronds and all the leaves have exactly the same pattern. The dirt floor is a muted gray color with no variations in shade or texture and it's as level as a table top. The trees that I can see in the mist are all the exact same size and have the exact same pattern of branches, like someone did a crude copy-and-paste.

This place isn't real. It lacks the small details and irregularities that a real place would possess.

Subaru looked up at the sun overhead. A moment later, Subaru realized that the ball of light above wasn't a sun. It was an enormous ball of fire hovering thirty feet from him. Long spindly tendrils of flame reached out from the central body and drifted weightlessly through the air.

Subaru heard something rumbling in the forest just out of sight. He turned and saw a titanic long, snake-like black body crashing through the underbrush at lightning speed.

What is that?! It looks like something made of sludge. It looks like the Black Water but... the Black Water was like a creeping puddle. This looks more like a raging river that's jumped out of its banks...

"Hellooo..." A girl's voice whispered through the clearing. She spoke in a sing-song voice.

Subaru looked around but saw no one. The sludge monster continued to rampage through the undergrowth like a runaway train, circling the clearing but making no effort to come closer.

"I'm coooming..." The same voice whispered.

The strange creature suddenly reared up from within the shrubs, swaying like a cobra and towering over Subaru like a great tree. The monster resembled nothing so much as an enormous slug. Its body lacked any identifiable features such as a mouth, eyes, or limbs. It just looked like black sludge somehow brought to life.

The monster swayed far above Subaru's head but it seemed to completely ignore him. Instead, it extended its blunt nose toward the fireball burning above.

The fireball's spindly tendrils of flame drifted toward the monster. As soon as the first tendril made contact, the monster liquefied and was drawn up the burning limb like a thick milkshake sucked through a tiny straw. The fireball swelled and became too bright for Subaru to look at. Then its light faded. When Subaru looked again, the sun-like sphere had become the color of a fresh bruise. It sat high above, still burning sedately but its light and heat had been drastically reduced.

Subaru stared at the fireball opened-mouthed. *What the FUCK just happened?! Did the sun eat the slug? Did the slug eat the sun? Or is this a case of neither and this is some weird example of how baby... 'whatevers' are born?*

"Daphne is here," A breathy voice whispered from behind him, close enough for Subaru to feel the breath on the back of his neck. "Subaru..."

"We need a room," Anri said to the innkeeper in Stoneybrooke, early that afternoon.

The innkeeper, a burly man with a tiny red mustache, squinted down at Anri. "How old are you?" He asked.

"Ask me how old my money is instead," Anri said brusquely, holding out a silver coin in her good arm. She absently adjusted her arm-sling. Anri was on edge. She'd seen no sign of Elsa and that was suspicious. Anri didn't believe for a moment that Victoire had held Elsa back for more than five minutes, much less beaten her. So where was she? Elsa was a relentless tracker. Her losing the trail would be an amazing stroke of luck and Anri had learned long ago not to accept good luck unquestioningly.

The innkeeper scratched his nose. "How many of you and for how long?"

"Just me, my brother, and his wife," Anri replied. "We'll need a room with two beds. Just tonight for starters. If we like it here, we might stay longer."

The innkeeper nodded and took the coin. "Upstairs. Third door on your left," The innkeeper said. "Supper is just after sundown."

Anri nodded and then walked back out of the inn.

Emilia stood outside, huddling against the inn. She cradled the bundled-up Subaru in her arms while Patrasche stood close by.

In an effort to avoid detection as an elf, Emilia had her hood pulled very low over her face, so low that she was effectively blind. People walked down the street not far away but all Emilia could see of the Stoneybrooke pedestrians was their feet.

Emilia heard more than saw someone approaching. She assumed that it was Anri until she heard a gruff voice ask, "Hey, got a copper to spare?" in a slurred voice. From under her hood, she could see his old and poorly maintained boots.

Emilia jumped back. "Get away from me!" She almost screamed, clutching Subaru closer to her.

The stranger jumped back and a few of the locales stopped to look at the commotion.

Patrasche bent her head protectively over Emilia and gave the man a low growl.

"OK! OK!" The stranger exclaimed, beating a hasty retreat. "Forget that I asked!"

The few onlookers grew bored and, realizing that nothing more of interest was likely to happen, they kept walking.

I don't know what to do, Emilia grieved. I can't do anything to help Subaru. I can't keep him safe. I can't curse his illness. I can't even make him happy. All I can do is be a lead weight around his neck, dragging him to ground...

Yesterday I told him to leave me. I know that was the right thing to do but it took absolutely everything that a weak, helpless little girl like me had just to be able to say it.

I have nothing even close to that kind of willpower left. I couldn't bring myself to ask Subaru to leave again if the fate of the world depended on it. If Subaru broke our engagement and went to live with someone else, I think I might collapse and beg him to bring me with him as a mistress... or even as a maid...

Anything as long as I could stay close to him.

He's the only one that can make me feel safe.

He's the only person who's stopping me from inflicting even more pain and misery on this world...

"Mili," Anri said, causing Emilia to jump. "This way."

Anri took Emilia by the sleeve and led her inside the inn. Anri walked slowly, guiding Emilia's steps since she knew that her hood was pulled so low that she could barely see.

Anri took a wary glance at the innkeeper.

The man behind the counter looked suspicious but he didn't seem inclined to ask any questions. At least not so far.

Emilia's reached the staircase inside the inn and was guided up by Anri.

Subaru spun around and saw what might have been the strangest sight that he had ever beheld.

The girl before him was tied up in what looked like an upright coffin. The box's open lid was split in half, like window shutters. The coffin was filled up with what looked like some very soft and comfortable pink padding. In the middle of that padding lay a girl. She looked to be about fourteen with pale, colorless hair and a mouth full of sharp teeth. What was even stranger was that this fourteen year old girl appeared to have some very unusual fetishes.

The girl was chained head to foot inside the coffin in such a way that she could not move a millimeter. She was wearing a tight bondage suit that, if anything, looked even more restricting than the chains. Both the chains and the body suit were locking her legs tightly together beneath her body while her arms were widely separated. She wore a broad purple blindfold.

"Who are you?" Subaru demanded.

The girl cocked her head. "Daphne is here, Subaru," The girl repeated, not changing a single note of inflection in her previous statement.

Subaru scowled. *I remember something my Mother once told me about the 'Mathematician's answer.' It's an answer that fully answers the question asked but doesn't provide any kind of useful information. Like if you ask someone if they know what time it is and they say 'yes.' This girl has twice told me her name but nothing about who she actually is or what she's doing here.*

"What are you?" Subaru rephrased.

Daphne thought for a moment. She looked off into the distance despite her blindfold and she took a step back, seeming to be deep in thought.

Subaru realized to his shock that the girl hadn't moved at all and was in fact incapable of moving. Instead the coffin that she rested in had moved. The coffin was mounted on strange crab-like legs and it had extra appendages protruding from the front that resembled a centipede's pincers or a spider's fangs. The coffin wasn't being carried by some monster, the coffin was the monster. Some insectine-abomination created just for the purpose of carrying the restrained girl around.

"I am Daphne, Subaru," The girl explained quietly. "I am the Witch of Gluttony."

Subaru's jaw dropped. "You're a witch?!"

"Yes," She replied calmly.

"How did you get here?" Subaru demanded. "Hell, where *is* here?"

Daphne looked around as if her blindfold was not restricting her vision in any way and her crab-coffin turned slowly in a circle. "This appears to be the realm of dreams."

"Dreams?"

"Yes. A place where the minds of individuals connect to the Soul of this World," Daphne continued matter-of-fact. "Dona spends a lot of time here. I don't like Dona very much but Nerva asked me to be nicer to her," Daphne rambled, sounding a bit sullen.

Subaru blinked, struggling to follow along Daphne's line of thought. "Um. You seem to be restrained. Did you need a hand with that?"

Daphne thought for a moment. "That wouldn't be a good idea, Subaru," She said regretfully. "I tied myself up because I have a hard time repressing my appetite. I'm so very hungry..." She finished in an almost dreamy voice.

Subaru frowned. "Wait a second, aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Daphne cocked her head. "Hm?"

"All the witches were supposed to have been killed by the Witch of Envy when she destroyed most of the world," Subaru replied.

"Tella destroyed the world?" Daphne asked, sounding slightly impressed. "Where did little Tella get that kind of power?"

Subaru scratched his head, unsure of how to respond to that question. "I'm not sure. Don't you know? I mean the Witch of Envy did kill you, right?"

Daphne cocked her head again. "Daphne is not dead, Subaru," She corrected calmly.

Subaru blinked. "Wait, you're not?! I thought that the Witch of Envy devoured all the other witches!"

"Tella eat Daphne?" She asked skeptically. Daphne shook her head. "Daphne is not dead. Daphne is just sleeping, Subaru. How else could she come here and find you?" She asked logically.

Subaru scratched his chin. "Um... OK. I... *guess* that makes sense," He said slowly, uncertain if Daphne's argument really did make any sense or not. "Why are you here?"

"Bored," The girl proclaimed laconically. "Being sealed up for centuries is boring. Especially now that I'm awake after all the noise coming from Dona's grave."

Subaru hesitated, uncertain what that meant. "Yeah, I guess it would be pretty boring but... why did you come to me?"

Daphne considered this for a moment. "Because you have a part of me. A piece that was stolen long ago."

"I do?" Subaru said dubiously.

"You have a shard of my Authority," Daphne grinned with razor-sharp teeth.

Subaru's jaw dropped. "What?!" Subaru said. "I don't have Gluttony!"

"Apparently, you do. Did you kill one of the usurpers?" She asked, sounding not terribly interested.

Subaru frowned. *So, is she saying that when I killed Roy, I picked up his Authority? I haven't felt any different lately. And did I steal Petelguese's too or did that not happen?*

"Because you have a shard of my power," Daphne continued. "And then were contaminated by a creation of my Authority, I was able to follow the trail back and find you here. It's very nice to meet you, Subaru. I haven't talked to anyone else in such a very long time..."

For a moment, Daphne sounded so lonely and sad that Subaru reached up to pat her head and try to comfort her. However, before he could do so, her coffin leaned sharply forward until Daphne's face was inches from Subaru. "Subaru, do you have anything to *eat*?" She asked plaintively.

Subaru swallowed hard as the Witch looked down at him through her blindfold. Her maw full of sharp teeth was close enough to kiss. Subaru glanced down at the crab-coffin's body which was gripping the ground with sharp legs to avoid losing its balance. "Um. No, sorry," Subaru replied. Subaru slowly pulled his hand back, suddenly worried he might lose that hand if he put it anywhere near the Witch's mouth.

"Oh," Daphne said in a morose voice as she straightened up. Her crab-coffin scuttled away a few feet and Daphne stared off into the misty forest with a moody expression.

Subaru cleared his throat. "So what were you saying about being tied up?"

"Hm? Oh. I don't know. It's very hard to control myself these days. I'm so very, very hungry. If I was free, I don't think I could control myself. I might eat anything right now. *Anything...*" Daphne trailed off but her voice was more eager than apprehensive and Subaru swallowed hard.

Subaru coughed. "Say, Daphne, if you're a witch then maybe you could help me with something?"

"Oh?" Daphne murmured incuriously.

"I'm trying to break a curse. I thought maybe you might have heard about it and could suggest something."

"Have you tried *Azoth*?" Daphne asked.

"Um. Never heard of it," Subaru admitted. "Is that something that cures curses?"

"It's a solvent. A potion that breaks down magic into its base components. It breaks curses and other spells by reducing them to six flavors of raw mana," Daphne recited in a bored voice.

Subaru made a face. "Um. I think this might actually be a very powerful curse, Daph. All the memories of my wife have been, well, erased."

"Hm?" Daphne said, still not turning around to look at him.

"She remembers everything that's happened to her and so do I but for some reason, all of our friends act like they'd never met her before. As far as I can tell, everyone in the whole world has forgotten about her. Ever heard of a curse like that?"

Daphne thought for a moment and her crab-coffin slowly turned around so that the witch could look at Subaru. "It sounds to Daphne like your wifey isn't cursed. Her name has been *eaten*."

Subaru blinked. "*What?!*" He asked incredulously.

"It's a power of Gluttony, Subaru," Daphne explained. "When you eat someone's name, you devour all of the mental connections that people have made to that name. The sweetness of the memories shared with their cherished friends, the bitterness of their enemies' wounds, every salty tear, every savory love," Daphne's coffin started to tremble and vibrate. "It's so delicious! I haven't eaten anyone in so very long!" She declared in rapture, her face twisted in an ecstatic smile and drool visibly dripped through her sharp fangs. Her crab-coffin's legs extended to their full length until Daphne towered over Subaru. The coffin began to rock back and forth wildly as Daphne seemed to go into a delirious frenzy.

Subaru could only stare at the exultant witch in disbelief. "Um, Daphne?"

The coffin-crab slowly sank back into a normal posture. "Yes, Subaru?" She said calmly.

"Would you happen to know any way of *breaking* this um, curse?" Subaru asked.

Daphne cocked her head. The coffin-crab scuttled off a few steps and then began to move around the clearing as Daphne frowned. It was almost as if the witch was pacing while deep in thought.

Finally, the coffin-crab returned to its previous position so that Daphne could face Subaru. "Have you tried *Anima*?" Daphne asked.

"What's *Anima*?" He asked.

Daphne gasped. "You've never tried *Anima*?!" She said in horror. "How are you even alive? What *is* life without *Anima*?! What's the point in living without-"

"Daphne," Subaru cut her off. "Can we... rein this in a little?"

Daphne was still 'staring' at Subaru in shocked disbelief but she finally nodded. "I would suggest giving your wifey *Anima*, Subaru. It connects a person to the Soul of this World. That should be enough to restore the world's missing memories of your wifey."

Subaru scratched his chin. *So all I have to do is feed my wifey...* Subaru made a face and then shook off Daphne's bizarre turn of phrase. *So all I have to do is feed Emilia... a completely unknown substance that a witch whom I just met assures me will make everything better...* "Are you sure about this?" He asked dubiously.

Daphne sniffed. "Be nice, Subaru!" She sounded both petulant and offended. "I am the greatest master of alchemy and potions in centuries! I was revered as the... *second*... most brilliant witch of my time," Daphne trailed off with a growl.

Subaru rocked his head back and forth. "OK... any idea is better than nothing, I suppose. Where do I find it?"

"You don't find *Anima*, Subaru. You make it. I was the first to make the Philosopher's Stone in thousands of years," She said proudly. "I was a genius at alchemy. I think that was part of what made the Authority choose me."

"Wait, what?!" Subaru asked in surprise.

"The Philosopher's Stone is a catalyst that facilitates the creation of extremely powerful magical potions, potions whose production would be infeasible any other way. I was a prodigy at alchemy," Daphne mused, scuttling off a few steps. "Daddy was sick and he was desperately trying to find a cure. I was his little helper. He used me to test some of his potions. I created *Soma* to try and cure him. We drank it... The Authority came to me... And then I... forget exactly what happened next. I just remember being really, really hungry..." She trailed off.

I have some theories about what happened next, Subaru thought grimly. "Daphne, can you tell me how to make *Anima*? I need to cure Emilia."

Daphne hesitated. "What about a trade?" She wheedled.

A trade? "Alright," Subaru said slowly. "I guess that sounds fair. What did you want me to tell you?"

"Telling is a waste of time," Daphne said dismissively.

"Um. Not if you're trying to learn something, Daph," Subaru disagreed.

"I know a much faster way! I'll swap you a bit of me for a bit of you!" Daphne proclaimed excitedly.

"...What does that mean?" Subaru asked warily.

Daphne thought for a moment. "It's a little like eating a name," She explained. "You give me copies of some of your memories and emotions and I'll give you copies of some of mine."

Subaru hesitated. "*Copies*?" Subaru emphasized.

"Yeah. You'll still have all of your memories. They might fade a little but that's the price of making copies. Believe me, I wouldn't give up my potions."

Subaru thought for a moment. *I don't really like the sound of this. But what if I say no? Daphne might be the only one who knows how to restore everyone's memories of Emilia.*

Do I really have a choice?

"Alright," Subaru said slowly. "How do we do this?"

"Give me your hand," Daphne said eagerly.

Subaru started to reach out for Daphne's chained hand but instead Daphne opened her mouth very wide and said "Ahhh!" in a sing-song voice, like a small child begging for a treat.

"Whoah!" Subaru jumped back, holding his own hand possessively. "I'm not going to let you bite my hand off!"

"Hm," Daphne thought for a moment. "How about just your pinkie then?"

Subaru hesitated. "How do I know you won't just grab the whole thing?" He hedged.

"Cut it off," Daphne suggested.

The crab-coffin sliced its scissor-like fangs together a few times with a shearing sound.

Subaru looked down at his hand with a sick expression on his face.

I hate this. I hate this but this might be my only chance to fix everything...

Subaru thought of Emilia and then gingerly put his finger in-between the monster's slicing fangs and closed his eyes.

The monster sheered through the joint like it was tissue paper.

Subaru looked down at his severed finger that lay on the dirty ground and fought not to scream.

Then his face twisted in confusion. His hand was bleeding but it was a slow, seeping kind of bleeding rather than the huge spurt of blood one would expect after a sudden amputation.

Stranger still, it didn't hurt at all.

"This is a dream, Subaru," Daphne said with some amusement. "You didn't lose your *real* finger. It's just symbolic."

That made Subaru feel a little better. "Well, you might have said that upfront," He muttered. "So what do we do now?"

Daphne again opened her mouth wide with a musical 'Ahh' but Subaru shook his head. "Slow down. How are you going to give me your memories?"

"Oh," Daphne squirmed for a moment. "Fair is fair, I guess," She admitted. Subaru watched her extend her pinkie finger.

Subaru frowned. "Daph, your hand won't reach your... um... crab-fang things," Subaru said awkwardly.

Daphne shrugged. "Just bite it!" She said impatiently.

Subaru made a pained expression. "Really?" He asked in a sick voice.

"Come on! Hurry up!"

Subaru sighed and moved closer to Daphne's crab-coffin. He was careful to stay well clear of the crab's slicing jaws.

Because of Daphne's restraints, it took a little effort but he finally managed to get her pinky finger into his mouth up to the knuckle. It was as thin as a carrot stick.

Subaru glanced up at Daphne's face but her expression betrayed no misgivings. If anything, she looked excited.

Subaru sighed and bit down hard.

The bone parted as if he had bit into freeze-dried ice-cream. The flavor wasn't unpleasant but it was unfamiliar and Subaru struggled not to spit the finger out.

Subaru chewed as fast as he could and swallowed the gruesome mouthful.

"Mine now, please!" Daphne said hurriedly, opening her mouth wide.

Subaru grabbed his forehead as the world swam around him. He teetered in place and then he collapsed onto the hard ground.

"Oh. Well, OK," Daphne said in a friendly voice. "Whenever you wake up, I guess."

Subaru found himself sitting at a table full of bubbling flasks and decanters in a rainbow of different colors. Most of the potions were connected by transparent tubing and drops of strange glowing fluid slowly flowed from one container to another in a massive, interconnected process. Subaru had never taken a chemistry class in his life but he somehow knew every potion on that table like the back of his hand. Concepts like 'distillation,' 'sublimation,' and 'acetalisation' bounced around in his head. Each flask was working at a specific temperature and pressure, gathering products from previous steps and making new regents *in situ* before the products bubbled out of their flask and slipped further down the chain.

Subaru drummed slender fingers with ragged, short nails against the table. He sighed, *I need to focus. That annoying Flugel always warned me that my Authority was only marginally under my control. He kept said 'Focus on satiation, not gorging.' Seek out that flash of 'Dionysian ecstasy' as he put it, instead of always looking to feel full...*

Yeah, that's really sound advice, buddy but it's really very hard to live by. I'm counting down the heartbeats until tonight's feast.

Subaru snorted. *As if that idiot knew what it was like to really feel hungry. Down in your bones hungry. He's probably never known real hunger in his life! I'd do anything to fill in the emptiness inside of me...*

He glanced at the bubbling Azoth as it slowly condensed in the final flask as a thick purple syrup. Inside the previous flask was a red orb the size of a baseball. It looks like a faceted ruby and every few seconds it pulsed, glowing a brilliant red like a constant heartbeat.

The Philosopher's Stone. That's what lets me make Azoth. Without it, the costs to produce that potion would require all mana on a continent.

Even with the Philosopher's Stone as a catalyst, Azoth was extremely complicated to make, requiring a series of steps and very precise temperatures and pressures to make all the necessary ingredients. Subaru remembered working on this mouthful of Azoth for close to a month and he didn't dare let it out of his sight for long. Even a very small variation in temperature or pressure would be enough to ruin weeks of work. Worse, that tiny variation would almost inevitably produce a variety of unexpected gaseous compounds, all of which were either poisonous, explosive, or both.

Subaru closed his eyes and sighed. There would be no *Anima* until the ceremony tonight but at least it was only a few hours away. He looked at the other table where a bright green liquid was pouring into a small keg. *Soma* was trivial to make compared to Azoth. He just had to set up the ingredients and let it cook for an hour or two. But if the new Postulant that Giorti had been interviewing was really serious about joining the Order then they would need a taste of *Vitae* and regular doses of *Soma* before much longer. Later, he'd reduce the *Soma* to powder so that it was easier to work with.

A hesitant knock came from behind him.

Subaru turned around and saw a chubby man in a purple robe standing diffidently by the open door. "Forgive me, Lady Daphne," He bowed.

"Hey, Giorti," Subaru murmured in a bored tone as he examined a bubbling flask. "How did the auction last night go?"

Giorti's face grew bittersweet. "I won the auction. I *did* acquire a flawless copy of Choval's masterpiece 'The Pillar of Heaven.'"

"But?" Subaru murmured, poking at the flask.

Giorti sighed. "I admit, I still wish that I had been able to find an original," He said wistfully.

"That would be a waste of time," Subaru commented, frowning at the flask.

"Mistress?"

"I've told you this a thousand times, Giorti. That statue you bought has been magically produced. Magic reproductions work off the molecular level. The statue you bought is an exact duplicate of the original in every way, indistinguishable even to an expert. It is a perfect copy down to the smallest chip and smudge, completely indistinguishable from the original," Daphne grumbled with an eye roll.

"But-"

Subaru cut him off. "Take any work of art, Giorti, like a painting for example. Duplicate the first tiniest dot of color and then the next and then the next. You'll be left with an *exact* copy. That's all there is to it. I've said it before and I'll say it again," Subaru muttered, watching the bubbling flasks. "No object can transcend its own smallest part."

"True, my lady, but the original does have a vast amount of sentimental value."

"If this 'sentimental value' exists," Subaru said skeptically, "Then it was copied as well. Nothing unreal exists, Giorti."

Giorti gave Subaru a half smile. "Forgive me, Mistress but that seems like a very odd philosophy coming from a witch."

Subaru sniffed and tapped one of his flasks. He muttered something and a small jet of flame erupted from his finger, increasing the temperature of the reaction inside the beaker. "Nothing happens in defiance of the laws of nature, Giorti. Only in defiance of what we know of them. Incidentally, has there been any word from Jango?"

Giorti sighed. "I'm afraid so, Lady Daphne. Jango found the grave but it was empty. There's no trace of him left."

Subaru slammed his fist against the lab table. "Damn it! I need to eat *some* kind of remains to get his memories!" Subaru hissed.

"Forgive me, Lady Daphne but why is this suddenly so important to you?"

Subaru sighed. "Because this is my only real chance to figure out what she's been up to! Even when she comes to the tea parties, she still won't explain. She keeps pushing off our questions, acting like we're not smart enough to understand what she's doing but I understand very well: She's breaking one of the cardinal rules."

Giorti was silent.

Subaru sighed. "What about Jango's other mission? Any luck there?"

"I'm afraid not, Lady Daphne. He reports that it's very slow going. The Grey Mountains are swarming with Black Dragons that are difficult to avoid. Thus far, he has had no sightings of Gold Dragons. Locating a Golden Dragon nest will take some time. Golden dragons are critically endangered."

"Of course, they're critically endangered! Golden dragon eggs make omelets fit for the gods! Whole *books* have been written about the subtle interplay between the albumen and the yolk," Subaru said in a voice filled with yearning.

Subaru realized that he was drooling and he hastily wiped his mouth.

"Forgive me, Lady Daphne," Giorti said uncertainly. "But given how endangered a golden dragon is, is it really appropriate to use their eggs for omelets? If we acquired a few eggs, perhaps we could breed them in order to repopulate."

"Giorti," Subaru sighed. "Some days I really don't know why I bother to put up with you."

Giorti abruptly stopped talking.

"If I can *taste* their eggs then I can reproduce them! The complex weave of textures and flavors will live on in my research! I can mass produce their eggs using my Authority! The indescribable sensation of eating their eggs will one day be as commonplace to us as the lowly chicken egg is now! Do you really think that the average person in this world cares if the sky is full of dragons of *any* color?!"

Giorti hesitated.

"No! They care about having a belly full of good food! Who cares what happens to the dragons once we can reproduce their essence? If their essence lives on, does it really matter if the *animals* do?"

Giorti was silent and Subaru was certain that he was carefully considering a safe response.

Subaru rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I doubt that you came in here to discuss this."

Giorti nodded. "Ah yes, forgive my distraction, Lady Daphne. Sister Jenevieve has arrived for tonight's feast."

Subaru's face brightened and his mouth watered. Subaru quickly wiped away a thin stream of drool from his chin.

He watched as the last purple drop fell into the vial and then he stoppered the *Azoth* tightly and slipped the vial into a pocket.

Subaru went to the other table and checked the bubbling *Soma* as the last of it poured into a small keg about six inches high. Subaru put a lid on the keg.

"Bring the keg," Subaru ordered Giorti. Giorti hastened to obey as Subaru marched away from the lab. Subaru had no idea where he was going but somehow he knew exactly how to get there.

As he left the room, he happened to pass by a mirror and in the mirror he saw a girl with pale hair who looked to be about fourteen.

Wait! I'm Daphne! Somehow I'm... Daphne!

The girl looking back at him in the mirror looked so different from the Daphne that Subaru had met in the dream that he had to double check his conclusion before he really believed it. This Daphne was wearing a stylish purple pleated skirt and a thin white blouse. Her teeth were unusually sharp but they weren't the grotesque chompers that Subaru associated with her modern incarnation or the other Gluttonies. Daphne's features were regular and could have been considered pretty but it was her eyes that

demanded attention: Her eyes were nothing short of captivating, like deep pools of emerald.

Despite his shock, Subaru found that he was unable to pause his journey and he continued to walk down the hall as if the sight of his reflection was in no way remarkable.

The shock of realizing that he was someone else quickly subsided and Subaru began to experience the world as Daphne once again. He felt himself subsumed by her memories and experiences.

That man in the robe. Giorti. He was one of the first to join me when I acquired my Authority. The elders had their doubts about the direction that I was taking my branch of the Order all those years ago but the young loved it and Giorti was one of my first acolytes.

Jenevieve. I remember her. I gave her that name. Flugel told me that it means 'woman of the family.' I gave her that name when we took her in. We found her huddled by the side of the road, abandoned, starving, and almost dead.

Horror of horrors. ...What kind of world is this that allows someone to go hungry?

I'll fix that. I swear I will. I'll see to it that hunger is a thing of the past...

She was so young. She didn't even know what her name really was. She'd been living on the streets in that city for years. She told us a long series of nicknames and insults that the locals would call her when they pleased to call her anything.

I named her Jenevieve...

We took her in. We raised her. Five years was a ridiculously small time to become an Acolyte of the Order but she surprised us all with her dedication.

As soon as she reached full rank, she declared her intention to hold a feast. She wept with joy when I chose her from all the other petitioners...

Subaru paused in his journey. Giorti was plodding behind him, the tubby man struggling to carry the small keg.

"Actually, Giorti," Subaru mused. "Let's check the greenhouse first."

The greenhouse was an enormous glass dome at least a half mile in diameter. It contained a veritable forest. Full grown fruiting trees stood side by side with odd ferns and shrubs. Strangely, all the plants were as black as coal. A dozen men and women in purple robes worked diligently to tend to the plants.

Subaru shook free of Daphne for a moment. *There's something wrong in here*, His instincts warned him.

Subaru couldn't quite put his finger on it but he was certain that there was something dangerous in this place.

A moment later, Daphne's memories subsumed him again and Subaru realized that it didn't matter what was happening. This was a memory and he was just a passenger on this journey. He had no ability to intervene.

Subaru walked up to an enormous tree whose branches were heavy with a strange, unfamiliar green fruit that reminded Subaru of bell peppers.

A girl in a purple robe was tending to the tree, working the soil around its roots with a spade. She also had a wheelbarrow full of what looked like scraps from a butcher shop: offal, bones, entrails, and other animal refuse.

Are they using that as fertilizer? Subaru wondered. *It might be good for the soil but I doubt it'll smell good after a few weeks. Maybe that's why the entire greenhouse reeks.*

The girl returned to the wheelbarrow and brought it over to the other side of the tree. Subaru watched as she dumped all the meat against the tree roots.

A moment later, there was a horrible chomping and crunching sound.

Subaru broke out in a cold sweat as he felt his body walk around to the other side of the tree.

The tree had an enormous, slavering maw growing out of the lower trunk. The tree was tearing into the meat that had been dumped into it, cracking through the bones without any effort.

In seconds, a wheelbarrow full of animal parts were all gone and the mouth became still although it still drooled copiously down the trunk.

"How is it doing?" Subaru asked clinically.

The worker jumped and fell to her knees. "Oh! Lady Daphne! Forgive me! I didn't see you-"

Subaru waved off her excuses. "Save the bowing and scraping," She said in a bored tone. "I asked, how is the tree doing?"

The worker got back to her feet. "Very well! I mean... I *think*, Lady Daphne," The girl said uncertainly.

Subaru checked a sigh. Subaru reached up to pick one of the strange fruits and discovered to his considerable irritation that he wasn't tall enough.

This felt like a very familiar frustration to him.

"Lady Daphne," The girl said solicitously. "Would you like me to-"

Subaru concentrated for a moment and in response, the tree *bent*. Its branches groaning and creaking as they moved and flexed. The fruit-bearing limb dropped low until Daphne could easily pick one of the strange fruits from its branches. Then the tree returned to its former posture.

Subaru turned the fruit over and over in his hands, inspecting it. It really did look very much like a green pepper but the top of the fruit had a strange 'seam' running around it, almost like a pea-pod.

Subaru yanked at the stem and the top of the fruit popped off.

Inside, the fruit was completely hollow. The fruit had a thin, dry outer shell and the insides were filled with nothing but a fine white powder.

Subaru took a pinch and raised it to his lips to taste.

What the fuck?! Subaru thought. This is processed sugar!

"How is it, Lady?" Giorti asked deferentially.

Subaru shrugged. "It's... adequate. I think that we can call this experiment a qualified success. Let's check the succulents."

Subaru led the way through the greenhouse with Giorti following silently. They left the girl behind who continued to bow deeply until Subaru was well away.

As Subaru walked further into the greenhouse, he found himself in a realm of horrors. Where the 'sugar tree' looked pretty much like a normal tree except for its mouth, the

other plants in Daphne's greenhouse were abominations dredged up from a nightmare. Many of the plants were fleshy horrors that looked more like tumorous meat than any kind of vegetation. The plants all came in a mix of black and unnatural flesh-tones that made them look diseased and necrotic. Several of them looked slimy. Judging from the red and brown stains around their roots and the foul smell pervading the area, Subaru took it as a given that all of these plants ate meat. Subaru even thought that he briefly passed by a fruit tree that had what looked like pork chops growing from its boughs.

Finally, Subaru came to a stop in front of a small row of 'plants' that nearly defied description. The plant body was round and spiny like a horse chestnut. The plant measured two feet across but where a horse chestnut would have a hard shell, this plant looked soft, wet, and meaty like a grotesque tumor. A few short hollow tubes like intestines dangled underneath the plant.

Subaru wanted more than anything to stop looking at the freakish plant. Unfortunately, Subaru was not in control and he found himself forced to study the plant clinically. *I just want to get out of here before this thing opens a giant mouth and starts chewing on things*, Subaru whimpered. *I hated Little Shop of Horrors!*

Subaru looked around the area and noticed a small bucket not far away. He grabbed the bucket and placed it under the plant. Subaru's mind screamed in protest but his hands grabbed one of the tubes and yanked down.

Green fluid sprayed out of the tube like some grotesque parody of a cow and streamed straight into the bucket.

This liquid looks like the stuff that Daphne was cooking in the lab...

Subaru thought hard for a moment and found that he remembered things that he'd never known before. *I remember... Labs are good for experimenting with new compounds and new types of synthesis but they're not very efficient for making chemicals in bulk. So once Daphne masters the synthesis of a compound... she uses her Authority to create plants that will mass produce that compound from basic carbohydrates and proteins.*

This is both amazing and really, really disturbing...

Subaru had finished 'milking' the strange plant and handed the bucket full of green liquid to Giorti who was already struggling just to carry the keg.

"Some more *Soma* for the faithful," Subaru said laconically.

"I'm sure that they'll be most grateful, Lady Daphne," Giorti assured her.

Subaru sighed and stroked the fleshy plant like it was a pet. Subaru thought that the plant quivered in response but he prayed fervently that it was just his imagination.

"Just think, Giorti," Subaru said in a tone of wonder. "One day my creations will be all over the world. Providing good food three times a day to everybody! Hunger will be nothing but an old wives' tale. Something that parents use to scare children into behaving," He whispered wistfully.

Giorti coughed. "Um. Lady Daphne," He said awkwardly. "Forgive me for mentioning this but... I doubt that your brilliant creations can survive out in the wild..."

Subaru sighed. "I've already taken care of that, Giorti," He reminded him impatiently. "My creations are all fortified with high levels of Putrescine. No animal is going to be willing to try to eat them. When we did experiments, even most *insects* refused!"

Giorti hesitated. "Yes. That's all well and good, Lady Daphne but I was referring to the fact that all your creations are carnivorous..."

Subaru scowled. "Of course they are, you great dope! You're not going to get the number of calories necessary to produce large quantities of complex carbohydrates like

refined sugar and processed flour using nothing but water and sunlight!"

"I understand, my Lady. My point is that this means that we need to *feed* your creations manually," Giorti reminded her. "No animal is going to be stupid enough to crawl into an open mouth in a tree and be eaten alive by a plant!"

Subaru gave Giorti a sour look. "Then I'll just give them the ability to hunt down their own food then!"

Giorti looked quite alarmed by this prospect. He considered his answer carefully for several seconds. "Won't giving your creations the ability to move and pursue prey... cost as many calories as it gains?" Giorti asked weakly.

Subaru sniffed. "I'll figure it out. Maybe I could make them eat mana... Give me a break, I'm a genius, Giorti! I'll find the right answer eventually. Give me enough time and I could even replicate the Sun King's forest!"

Giorti had nothing to say to that and a few moments later, Subaru left the green house followed by Giorti who struggled to carry both the keg and the bucket of red liquid.

Anri and Emilia gently placed Subaru in the bed.

"Now what do we do?" Emilia asked.

Anri felt Subaru's forehead and bit her lip. "I'm not sure, Mili," She admitted. "I *think* he's doing OK..."

Emilia sunk down on the other bed and pulled her knees to her chest.

Anri shook her head. "Mili, stay here for a bit. I need to put Patrasche in the stable and then I'm going to take a look around. My family has a safe house in this village. Maybe one of my guards made it here and can help us."

Emilia nodded. "We'll be fine here. But be careful, Anri. Elsa is bound to be looking for us by now."

Anri took a deep breath and pulled up her hood before walking out of the room.

Subaru entered a large, indoor amphitheater where dozens of people sat or reclined with dreamy looks on their faces. The amphitheater could likely hold several hundred people although only about half that number were currently in attendance. Most of the attendees were dressed in loose robes but some were in near rags. The base of the amphitheater had an enormous stone altar-like platform with a massive cauldron, bigger than a hot-tub built into it. The top of the cauldron was flush with the altar's surface. Behind the great stone altar, placed atop a small dais, was an enormous stone throne. The throne was made of a single piece of carefully sculpted rock and the top of the throne had been shaped into a great cobra's head that hooded the seat.

As soon as Subaru walked in, the spectators all cried out in wonder and joy. They stared at him and their expressions became exalted, adoring.

Subaru rolled his eyes. *If I wanted adoration, I'd get a puppy. I expect something more useful from my Acolytes than just lying around and waiting to be fed. They're so annoyingly dependent.*

Giorti entered a few moments later, rolling the small keg along the ground. He held the bucket in his other hand. The crowd erupted in great excitement as Giorti struggled to roll the keg up the stairs onto the stone altar where dozens of tiny stone goblets waited for him. The crowd all began to fidget as if they could barely stay in their seats as Giorti opened the keg.

He measured the amount of green liquid precisely with a measuring spoon before pouring it into the stone goblets.

Subaru watched him for a moment and then took his accustomed seat on the throne.

It wasn't a comfortable seat. It never was. He'd requested that his throne have a serpent motif. He liked snakes. They were very logical animals and easy to understand. Not like people. But he had never asked that the throne be made of hard stone!

Subaru wished for the hundredth time that he had remembered to ask for some cushions.

It never fails. Whenever I remember to talk with Giorti about getting something to pad the throne, it's not the right time to ask and whenever it is the right time to ask, I've already forgotten all about it.

By now, Giorti had finished filling the first stone goblet and he brought it to Subaru, offering the cup with a low and reverent bow.

Subaru took the the goblet with disdain. The liquid inside was a vivid green and as opaque as paint. It almost seemed to glow. Subaru began to sip it slowly.

Actually, slowly was an understatement. Subaru might as well have been emptying the goblet with an eyedropper.

The taste was heavenly. The sensation was so powerful that Subaru briefly shook free from Daphne's consciousness.

This is amazing! I've never tasted anything like it! This can't be alcohol! Although if it was, I'd finally understand how people can get addicted to alcohol so easily. This stuff... This stuff must be like happiness in a glass or something!

The rush of euphoria faded slightly and Subaru was once again subsumed by Daphne.

"Does your latest batch meet with your satisfaction, my lady?" Giorti said anxiously. "Or is it not to your taste?"

Subaru sighed. "It's... OK," He admitted in a glum voice. "Maybe a *little* better than the last batch. Maybe a little bit worse. I've tried to re-balance the tannins this time. Not sure if that really accomplished very much. Next time I'm considering adding a secondary malolactic fermentation for some of the more bitter ingredients before blending them in with the other finished components."

Giorti clearly had no idea what Subaru was talking about but he bowed his head. He returned to the altar below Subaru's throne and began to call the names of the other acolytes. They approached one by one with their heads bowed and their hands trembling. They each accepted their daily ration of *Soma* with tearful gratitude. They each reverently took their tiny goblet in both hands and returned to their seat before partaking.

Subaru watched their barely concealed longing for the elixir with faint contempt. *Their dependency on the Soma is sickening. They think that their need for Soma is 'hunger?' These idiots have no idea what being hungry is really like. If any of these dolts held the burden of my Authority, they would have already devoured the whole world for their bellies.* Subaru took another tiny sip of *Soma*.

From the first sip of the *Soma*, Subaru felt lighter. His body's normal aches and pains eased and his problems seemed smaller and further away.

It almost feels like using Reason and Judgment.

It should, Subaru clinically answered his own thought as Daphne's memories retook control. *Soma opens up the drinker to ambient mana. The mana swirling through the air is absorbed by the drinker, increasing their total supply and thus augmenting their*

strength, speed, and endurance. Even their magic and intelligence are equivalently enhanced. You feel more powerful after drinking because you are more powerful.

And I need to keep a substantial quantity of Soma on hand for the other acolytes. It's the only way to provide seasoning.

Subaru heard a dozen sharp gasps from the crowd. As he looked up, he saw Jenevieve descended down the stairs into the amphitheater at the head of a long procession of Acolytes who were all dressed in hooded, purple robes.

Jenevieve was a beautiful girl of about eighteen with smooth white skin and long blond hair. She wore a thin white robe, belted around her slender body and nothing else. She was smiling in rapture and tears streamed down her cheeks as the procession descended to the amphitheater floor. Some of the spectators in the seats reached out to Jenevieve with murmurs of adoration. They tried to brush the hem of her robe with their fingers as she passed by.

Subaru stared up at Jenevieve with a kind of wonder. *How has it been ten years since she was declared an offering? It feels like only yesterday. Fifteen years altogether since she joined the Order...*

Jenevieve has spent ten years preparing for this moment. She's spent her life fasting for weeks at a time and was then offered only the finest of delicacies. The plates were small enough to fit in her hand but each and every bite felt transcendent to her; well-seasoned by her hunger.

We ordered her to abstain from fleshly pleasures for months and then ordered three of the most skilled lovers in the Order to worship her beautiful body for hours on end. She once maintained an unceasing vigil in the temple for seven days and nights until we permitted her to lay down on a bed of rose petals to learn the true meaning of rest.

Every sensation and experience was carefully selected and cultivated. Preparing her for this moment...

I remember one afternoon, when I was passing by the training chamber, I saw Giorti offering Jenevieve instruction with the whip. Jenevieve was stripped to the waist and blindfolded as Giorti slowly flogged her. I paused to watch them as Giorti urged her to stop struggling against the blow and to embrace the whip.

And she did. It was like watching the blossoming of a beautiful flower. I watched as Jenevieve forced her body to accept the pain, not becoming hardened and inured to it but... softening. She tried to will her body into becoming softer, more yielding to the lash, trying to extract the maximum amount of pain possible from each burning strike.

I was so proud of her. Why didn't I ever think to tell her that?

Jenevieve finally reached the floor of the amphitheater and her attendants gently slipped her robe off her beautiful body. They purple robed Acolytes backed away while bowing and joined Giorti at the side of the great altar.

Jenevieve stood nude in the center of the amphitheater, a warm smile on her face as she looked at Subaru.

Subaru got up off his throne and approached the naked Jenevieve.

"Lady Daphne," Jenevieve whispered, tears streaming down her face. She opened her mouth but words failed her as she groped for what to say.

Subaru quickly stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Jenevieve. His head only came up to Jenevieve's chest and the girl bowed her head over Subaru as she hugged him.

She's gotten so tall. When we met, she only came up to my stomach...

"Lady Daphne," Jenevieve whispered in a thick voice. *"Thank you. Thank you so much for granting me this experience..."*

Subaru reached up and stroked Jenevieve's face, wet with tears. Her cheek was smooth, soft, and glowing; like the skin of a baby newly-come from the bath.

For a moment, Subaru's hunger awoke and he struggled to repress the savage urge to bite the delectable morsel before him. He hadn't eaten in days and he was starting to push the limits of his own control.

"You've *earned* this, Jenevieve," Subaru whispered in reply. "No one worked harder for this moment than you. This moment is yours."

Jenevieve bowed her head and began to weep in gratitude, quickly brushing aside her tears and she turned to face the audience with a bright smile.

"I'm grateful that you've all come here today," She said in a clear voice. "That you're all here to share this wonderful moment with me. Remember, even if we die, we will live on in those whose lives we touched."

Subaru checked a sigh. He'd spent decades at the very least urging his followers to discard any infantile fantasies of 'immortality' or 'life beyond death.' Subaru had always preached to his followers that they should accept death as the liminal boundary of existence and revel in the accompanying freedom of the finality of that boundary. But few were willing to do so.

Jenevieve took a deep breath and lifted her face, her cheeks wet with tears. "I've spent most than half my life preparing for this moment. Every day I have sought out the finest sensations to prepare my mind and soul and under Lady Daphne's guidance I have become lithe and sweet. Each morning I have drunk the *Azoth* to prepare myself and today, my soul lies ready. The joy I feel this day is too great for my soul to bear and so, my soul shall open..."

The audience cooed and sighed at Jenevieve.

Subaru took the tiny vial out of his pocket. It was full of syrupy purple liquid. Subaru held it close to him with grave mien and then presented it with a bow to Jenevieve. She took the vial and slowly worked the cork out.

Subaru looked at the crimson purple with a strange fondness. *It takes me days to make a new supply of Azoth. It would have taken decades if not for the Philosopher's Stone! I found the recipes necessary for the Great Work in an ancient tome that I was unable to read. I could work out the Nigredo, the Albedo, and the Rubedo formulas but the manuscripts all made careful mention of something called "the King's Gift" which completely baffled me. I couldn't decipher the pages! In desperation, I was forced to finally call on... Dona for assistance. I hoped that if she helped me study the book, we could work together to translate it.*

To my immense irritation, Dona didn't even need to study it. She could read the language without any effort at all. Strangely enough, she wasn't willing to me very much about what was in the book. She gave me the formula I asked for which was easily the most complicated chemical synthesis I had ever found.

Then Dona refused to answer any more questions and just left! I never found out why but it was clear to me that, whatever Dona had read in that book, it had disturbed her mightily and she felt like she had a lot of thinking to do.

Even more annoying was the revelation that I could have never made it alone. Apparently the "King's Gift" can only exist by consent of both Gluttony and Greed.

How Dona smirked when I had to ask for her help again...

Creating the King's Gift took me years of endless trial and error. But once it was done and it was combined with the other three materials to create the Philosopher's Stone, I could craft potions long believed to be impossible as easily as I could boil water...

Jenevieve reverently raised the vial of Azoth to her lips and began to drink.

She sipped the purple liquid slowly. Subaru knew from accidental exposure that the drink tasted like a river of knives going down your throat but Jenevieve drank it by sips, dragging out the sensation for as long as she could.

When the vial was empty, Jenevieve handed the dry bottle back to Subaru. Jenevieve raised her face with a happy smile and she hopped into the huge cauldron built into the platform.

Subaru bowed his head and walked up to Jenevieve. Her head only came up to his chest now. He gently ran his hand up her naked stomach until he reached her heart. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated.

The amphitheater was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

A moment later, Subaru saw a small tear of bright crimson blood descend from Jenevieve's eye and drip down her cheek. Then another.

Then a drop of blood flowed down her arm.

Her body was... opening in countless places, leaking out fluids but her rapturous smile never wavered.

Jenevieve eyes rolled up in her head and she fell down into the cauldron that was rapidly filling with a viscous crimson fluid. It wasn't blood. It was too uniform and opaque to be blood. Its color was like red nail polish.

Jenevieve's body disappeared into the cauldron and the enormous basin just kept filling up with crimson fluid, far too much fluid for it to have come from Jenevieve's body.

In the end, the enormous cauldron was filled to the brim with bright crimson liquid. There was no trace of Jenevieve left, not a strand of hair or a flake of skin. Nothing but the strange fluid remained.

The crowd sighed in rapture as Subaru slowly returned to his throne, his thoughts melancholy.

Subaru felt something touch him. A 'spark' of Jenevieve's life entered into him.

My Authority has let me absorb the last of her life-force, Subaru thought. Just like her, it's sweet and vibrant and spirited.

The Philosopher's Stone will let me turn that spark into a full Decade of Vitae. I can use this life to restore another's youth or heal grievous wounds. I think Jenevieve would like that. The last of her life granted to give happiness to another...

Subaru stared down at the unmarred crimson pool sitting before him.

Ten years of her life were dedicated to achieving this moment...

Jenevieve, I hope that it was everything you dreamed of... Everything that you worked toward...

You deserve that much...

Did the sensations of your final moments live up to your expectations? I hope so.

Giorti bent down and carefully used an eyedropper to extract a tiny bit of fluid. He reverently approached Subaru with the eyedropper and offered it to Subaru.

Subaru took the eyedropper and placed a single drop of the crimson fluid on his tongue.

A moment later, Subaru slumped on his throne.

His mind whirled with a thousand images. Subaru's mind was drawn to the Soul of this World and for a moment he became one with everything.

This world had a beating heart and Subaru felt his own heart beating in time with it. This world was alive. The World Soul shared the consciousness of all lesser and quasi spirits in the world and for a moment, Subaru shared in it as well. Subaru sensed a nearby water spirit called Ladon that was charged by the World Soul with ensuring that the river-water of its river remained clean and flowed properly through all of its tributaries. He briefly shared the conscious of an earth spirit known as Minthe who tended to the roots of plants in the nearby fields and ensured that they had enough nutrients to grow big and strong. He became one with a spirit of the Great Sea who labored in the deepest depths and had never been glimpsed by humans and thus, had no name.

Slowly, Subaru found himself returning to his own being and the images became more human. He was deluged by thoughts and images that had been cultivated by Jenevieve. Subaru saw a thousand pictures, memories, and sensations from Jenevieve's life. Her pleasures, her yearning, her joy at coming to join the Order more than fifteen years ago and finally feeling accepted and loved. The awe and admiration that she had felt for Daphne.

Subaru experienced Jenevieve's long fasts. There was a memory where Jenevieve hadn't eaten for more than two weeks. The sharp pain in her stomach had faded into a dull ache. Set before Jenevieve was a tiny pastry that could easily fit in the palm of her hand with room left to spare. Jenevieve had also been presented with a tiny glass of blended juices specially selected so that their bitter flavor would offset and heighten the pastry's sweetness.

Jenevieve was starving but she didn't lunge at the food. Instead she took slow, tiny bites. She let the airy frosting dissolve on her tongue and the fluffy cake underneath swaddled her tongue in sweetness.

Jenevieve took her time breaking her fast. Her deprivation was over and more food was on the way but Jenevieve savored the moment, seasoning her body with memories of bliss and ecstasy for her coming offering.

During her fast, she'd taken her body right to the very limit of endurance. In just a few more days, her body would have devoured *itself*. Jenevieve had brought herself to the brink of death but this tiny cake was *life* and she celebrated each bite, each moment of life as only those who have come so close to their own doom can do.

The memories shifted and Subaru experienced Jenevieve blindfolded and restrained while three sets of hands caressed her helpless body. She thought that any more pleasure would break her into pieces but somehow those skilled hands found a way to coax yet more passion from her.

While academically interesting, Subaru did not find these sensations particularly fulfilling and he tried to will his mind to return to the pastry.

Another memory. Jenevieve flinched at the lash of the whip and fought not to struggle against it but to simply cherish every drop of bright crimson pain that flooded through her body. She straightened, deliberately trying to force her muscles to relax and soften so that the next blow would land even harder.

Finally, Subaru returned to himself and he saw Giorti staring at him in concern. Subaru knew that only a few seconds had passed since he'd tasted the *Anima* but it felt like years.

Subaru felt tears streaming down his face. "It's wonderful, Giorti. Jenevieve is so wonderful... This might be the best *Anima* that we have ever made," Subaru whispered in a choked voice.

Giorti nodded. "And so much too! We might get more than two hundred bottles from this! For a moment, I was afraid she might overflow the cauldron and we'd lose some of her!" He said in horror.

"Gods forbid!" Subaru shuddered at the terrible thought. Subaru looked up at the acolytes who walked through the amphitheater dispensing drops of the precious *Anima* to the spectators. Some of these spectators were openly weeping in a combination of ecstasy and anguish, each one sharing in the precious memories that Jenevieve had spent ten years to gather. Her life offered willingly to give pleasure and satiation to so many.

Subaru looked at the spectators with an unexpected lack of contempt. "Every drop of Jenevieve is priceless, Giorti," Subaru whispered. "I want every single drop bottled and make sure that you label the bottles carefully before putting them into the vault."

Giorti looked offended that Subaru even felt a need to say this but he bowed his head.

"Jenevieve's memories and experiences will be with us for centuries," Subaru said in a voice that was half pride and half melancholy.

Oh, Jenevieve... You did so well. I am so, so proud of you. You've brought me closer to the ultimate edge of sensation than I have ever been before...

Those people out there in the amphitheater, they'll treasure this moment for the rest of their useless lives. The life that you shared with them. If Jenevieve's Anima makes me feel this good then to them this must be a moment of sheer transcendence.

And yet, I'm certain that there is more to be felt. Deeper wells of sensation to tap into. Experiences of an intensity that few could even imagine.

I have dedicated myself to the immortal pursuit of sensation and happiness.

And one day I will find that ultimate line: the absolute limit of human sensation...

Giorti sighed. "Jenevieve was a truly special girl," He mused. "Loving, gifted, and dedicated to your mysteries, Lady Daphne."

Subaru nodded, staring off into the distance. He thought for a long moment. "Giorti, do you think that I could bring her back?"

Giorti blinked. "...Bring her *back*?"

Subaru nodded. "My Authority grants me the power of creation," He mused. "You've seen what I can create. As long as I've tasted something, I can spin and weave the strands of those memories together to make it again. After tasting the *Soma* I was able to create plants that would synthesize it. Now, I've tasted *Jenevieve*. Her flesh, her memories, her thoughts, her... what some unemployed poet would call 'her soul,' I suppose," Subaru rolled his eyes. "...Why *couldn't* I bring her back? A perfect duplicate, indistinguishable in every way from the original?"

Giorti looked aghast.

Subaru didn't seem to notice. "What if... we could do it all over again?" He mused. "What if I could bring back Jenevieve as an infant and have her raised in the Order? Trained to be an offering again? We could eat her and revive her over and over again. We could take copious notes on her development and training. We could discover what kind of experiences and memories make her taste sweeter, what moments and events make her more sour or bitter when she's finally sacrificed. We could experiment and adapt her training until Jenevieve reached the absolute peak of deliciousness! We could sacrifice her again and again and again until everyone in the entire world knew

the taste of her. Genevieve would be on the lips of an entire world! A worthy tribute to my cherished Acolyte," Subaru said in rapture. He realized that he was drooling and quickly wiped his chin.

As Subaru had talked, Giorti's expression had grown more and more horrified. Finally, Giorti swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "Um. Forgive me, Lady Daphne but... I think that Master Flugel would not approve..."

Subaru's euphoria was instantly snuffed out. He scowled at Giorti and slammed his hand down on the stone arm of his throne. "Don't mention that man's name to me! What does he know, anyway?"

Giorti hesitated. "If you recall, Lady Daphne, he did teach you how to control your hunger..."

Subaru snorted. "He didn't teach me anything that I couldn't have learned for myself!" Subaru folded his arms across his chest.

Giorti didn't answer right away. He took a deep breath. "That might be the case but... you do recall what happened when you first acquired your Authority, do you not? Never being able to feel full? You were roaming the countryside eating everything you could find! Animals, trees, *people*, leaves, furniture, basically anything that wouldn't break your teeth! You even ate your own par-"

Subaru cut him off. "Flugel thinks that he knows everything!" Subaru snapped. "He thinks that he has all the answers but you want to know something that he *doesn't* have?! An Authority!"

Giorti hesitated. "I don't have one either, Lady Daphne," He reminded her. "I don't pretend to understand their power or all of their effects. All I know is that according to Master Flugel, the Divine Exousia are supposed to be... very dangerous when one attempts to dig deeper into their mysteries and their origins. Master Flugel is extremely well-read and very wise-"

Subaru scowled. "I don't give a *shit*, Giorti!" He shouted and Giorti flinched. A few people in the stands were distracted from the ecstasy of their *Anima* by the argument and looked down at them. "I don't care about your precious Flugel! You know why?! Because there's absolutely *nothing* that I can learn from him that I can't read about in some fucking book!" Subaru scowled for a long moment. "Books are nothing but secondary experiences. Direct and personal experience is the most valuable form of knowledge. To experience a thing is the only way to truly understand it. And that's why *Anima* is the source of all wisdom."

Giorti bowed his head. "Of course, Lady Daphne. Also, if I forgot to mention it before, I heard back from Princess Ami this morning. She remains interested in becoming an offering."

"Really?" Subaru's face brightened.

Giorti nodded. "Apparently, she has an incurable disease and will not make it much further than ten years. She'd rather join us and share in our experiences than simply be offered in marriage to some noble to finalize an alliance."

Subaru looked exultant. "A princess!" He breathed.

Giorti gave Subaru an indulgent smile. "Yes, my Lady. I'll tell her that you approve," Giorti said with a bow.

"I want it, Giorti. I want it *all*," Subaru whispered.

"My lady?"

Subaru shuddered in rapture. "I want to *be* a Princess. I want to be a King, a barmaid, a genius painter, a simple man. I want to experience the glory of the knight when he

slays the wicked dragon and I want to experience the horror of the knight when he slides into the dragon's burning gullet. I want it all! All of their memories will become a part of me."

Subaru's voice grew awed. "I will spend an eternity becoming *everything*..."

"Yes, my Lady," Giorti bowed.

Subaru's stomach growled. The fast was over and he decided to treat himself to a small bite. "Go get me one of Georg's special pastries, Giorti. The ones with cherry-infused chocolate frosting. I'm hungry."

Giorti bowed low and scurried away. Subaru stared out at the huge amphitheater where the attendants still writhed in ecstasy out in their seats. Subaru took another drop of *Anima*.

The *Anima* took effect and Subaru was subsumed by Jenevieve's memories. As the memories of a thousand sensations flowed over him, Subaru fought hard to cling to the memories of her feasts. The indescribably perfect sensation of a full belly...

Emilia sat at the table in her room, nursing a glass of juice. With her hood pulled low, she had managed to sneak down to the kitchen long enough to get herself a glass of fruit juice from some dark, bitter berry that grew in Gusteko.

Subaru was still unconscious.

Emilia heard a knock on the door.

"Come in?" She whispered in a worried voice.

The door opened slowly and Anri slipped into the room, two people in a hooded robes. One was a stranger, a dark haired woman with a hard expression. Her skin was pale and her hair was set in a French braid.

The other was Victoire.

"Mili," Anri said, sounding practically bubbling, "This is Vera. She's the head of my bodyguards."

Vera gave Emilia a hard look.

Emilia recognized the expression on Vera's face and checked a sigh.

Vera glared at Emilia for a moment. "We were attacked by the assassin as we crossed the river. We stayed behind to protect the Princess and we got separated," Vera said, ostensibly for Emilia's benefit but mostly talking to Anri. "Only a few of us made it. I'm grateful to see you in good health, Princess."

Anri nodded. "It's all thanks to Subaru and Emilia," She told her. "They saved me from the storm and the Black Water!"

Vera squinted at Subaru and Emilia bristled.

Going by her expression, Emilia could read Vera's thoughts clearly: *'This' fought the Black Water?!*

"There are some very dangerous mabeasts in the forest, Princess," Vera replied suddenly.

Emilia glared at Vera. Yes, Emilia grumbled to herself. *It's very easy to mistake the Black Water for... absolutely anything else!*

"Vera," Anri said in a worried tone. "The Black Water poisoned Subaru. He didn't get the entire antidote. Is there anything that we can do for him?"

Vera stepped forward and glanced at Subaru's unconscious body. "He looks like he's coming along," Vera replied.

Anri actually touches Subaru when she checks on him! Emilia thought savagely. Could you make it more obvious that you don't really care if he lives?!

"Princess," Vera said. "Forgive me for being blunt but we really should be moving along."

"Yeah," Victoire agreed. "Sorry to be a bitch, Princess but we got serious problems to handle. We need to get back to Siros."

Anri bit her lip. "I'm not sure if it's safe to move him yet," She hedged.

Emilia sighed. *And naturally, Vera doesn't see that as a problem because...*

"Princess, we need to leave them behind," Vera said firmly.

And there it is.

"Vera!" Anri reproached.

Vera shook her head. "I'm sorry, Princess. My priority is to get you home safely. Your responsibility is to Siros, not to..." Vera gave Emilia a hard look and hesitated. "Outlanders."

Emilia knew the word Vera had been considering was much fouler and she gave the woman a glare.

Anri hesitated. Where she had told Victoire off for such comments, Anri clearly had a long history of trusting Vera's counsel and now she was wondering what the right thing to do really was.

"The assassins are hunting us," Vera continued. "If we leave, the assassins will likely ignore these people. They'll both be safer if we depart."

Emilia's face was stony. *That might actually be true. Not that Vera cares in the slightest whether it is true or not.*

All the same, Anri has done everything for Subaru that she can. I can't ask her to stay here if it will put her life in more danger.

"It's a good point, Princess," Victoire agreed. "I barely escaped from that dumb cunt Elsa with my skin! We should be putting as much distance between her and us as possible!"

Anri's face was mournful. "Mili," Anri said in a guilty voice. "I-"

"It's fine, Anri," Emilia said calmly. "Subaru is on the mend. We'll spend a day or two here while he recovers and then we'll head... back home," She said with a wary glance at Vera.

Anri looked awkward. "I worry about leaving you here all alone, Mili. This is Sanshi territory! They're vicious to outsiders, especially demi-humans! If any of the locals see you, you'll be in big trouble!"

Emilia forced a smile. "We'll be OK, Anri. I can keep my hood up to go grab some food if I need to and Subaru should be awake soon. He can run down to the kitchen for us."

Anri looked dubious.

Victoire seemed thoughtful and a slight smile flitted across her chin. She raised a finger to her mouth and gently bit into the tip.

Nobody noticed.

"Princess," Vera said in a grim tone. "We need to go."

Anri nodded and took a deep breath. She looked at Emilia with miserable eyes. "I'm very sorry, Emilia," She whispered. "I... I would have very much liked to host you both in Siros."

Emilia smiled. "Someday you will," She promised.

Vera looked daggers at Emilia.

Emilia ignored her and continued to smile at Anri.

Anri nodded. "I hope so, Mili. I really do," She said sadly. Anri suddenly smiled. "No. We'll meet again. I'm sure that our fates are entwined." Anri slipped out the door.

Now that Anri was gone, Emilia's smile instantly fell off her face. She looked at the two women with pronounced dislike.

Victoire walked up to Emilia with a friendly smile and gave the astonished elf a hug, pulling Emilia's face into her bosom. "Hey, no hard feelings, right?" Victoire said in a warm voice. "We're just taking care of our own shit, just like you. You and the little fucker can make it on your own now, right?"

Victoire deftly dabbed her bleeding finger into Emilia's drink.

Emilia squirmed in the embrace and quickly pushed Victoire away, looking affronted. Emilia didn't understand this abrupt mood shift but she had no friendly feelings toward Victoire at all.

"Victoire," Vera snapped. "Let's get moving!"

Victoire gave Emilia a smirk for a long moment then turned around obediently. "Coming, boss!" She almost sang.

Victoire was about to step out the door when Vera grabbed her upper arm.

Victoire's face was livid as she faced Vera. Her expression suggested that Vera could either move that hand or lose it.

Vera looked at her with a stone face. "Victoire, how *did* you escape the Bowel Hunter?" Vera whispered.

Victoire snorted. "I fucking told you how! I held her at bay for a minute and then all the shit-fucking peasants in the village came to investigate what the hell was going on! The bitch got distracted cutting up the locals and I bailed!"

"So, Elsa decided to forget all about you and go after unarmed civilians?" Vera said in a voice of profound skepticism.

Victoire lifted her chin. "Maybe the numb cunt realized that I was too much for her!"

"Guys? Are we going?" Anri called from down the hall.

Vera's glare was flinty but she gestured with her head and Victoire walked out of the room with a toss of her head and a snort.

Vera paused at the doorway just long enough to give Emilia a threatening look. Emilia's expression was coolly defiant as she glared back at Vera.

Vera left the room.

Emilia got off the bed she sat on and slowly limped over to Subaru's.

"Why did we even bother getting two beds?" Emilia murmured, sitting down beside Subaru. "I guess we didn't realize Anri would leave so soon..."

Emilia didn't notice as thick strands of black liquid dispersed in her juice and slowly disappeared.

Subaru's raised his head up off the dirty ground as he found himself back in the strange forest clearing.

Holy shit. I finally woke up!

I mean... I'm still dreaming... or something like it anyway, but at least I'm me again.

Subaru's mind swam with information, both the memories that he'd personally experienced during the vision and a thousand other memories that had been handed to him as some form of raw data.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Subaru?" Daphne murmured from inside her crab-coffin cage.

Well, I know how to make Anima and about a thousand other chemicals and potions, Subaru stared up at the bound witch in shock. What the hell happened to you?! How did Daphne go from being a brilliant and articulate chemist to a slobbering monster who needed to be chained down just to restrain her appetite?

Subaru's shock slowly softened into pity. *I don't know how or why but at some point Daphne's hunger turned on her. And she was the one devoured...*

Subaru shook his head. *I... I remember the intensity of her hunger. The gnawing emptiness... It was awful.*

"Then... Anima is made from... people?" Subaru said in a disturbed voice.

Daphne nodded. "Anima is formed from the very best of people."

"So you're telling me that to cure Emilia, I need to kill somebody?!" Subaru protested.

"We kill to sustain our lives everyday, Subaru," Daphne shrugged.

"Daph, I'm not talking about chickens here!" He shouted.

"You killed that Gluttony, Subaru," Daphne reminded him absently.

Subaru hesitated. *Actually, she does make a point. Like it or not, I've killed an awful lot of people since I came to this world...*

Fuck, when the hell did killing people get normal for me?! But... I mean, killing in self-defense is very different from hunting someone down to use their body as spare parts in a potion. Then again, if all I need to do to cure Emilia is to save a corpse the next time some asshole tries to kill me then that's not all that bad, is it?

I need to give this some thought... But there's still a problem.

"Daphne," Subaru said in distress. "It sounds like to make this 'Azoth' I need the Philosopher's Stone!"

"So?"

"Daphne, it took you years to make the stone! I can't spend years trying to cure Emilia!"

"Why not?" She asked curiously.

Subaru closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Daphne, Emilia is in danger," He said as if speaking to a child. "She's in more danger every single day because of this... name-thing. I need to cure her soon! Not to mention the fact that I don't think Regulus would help me make the stone no matter how sweetly I asked!"

Daphne thought for a moment and then shrugged. "Well, you could always go looking for *my* stone."

"Where is it?"

"No idea," Daphne said calmly.

"Big help," Subaru sighed. "Are you sure it's even still out there?"

"No."

Subaru rubbed his head.

"But it *probably* is," Daphne continued. "The Stones are terribly hard to destroy once they're created. They're formed from the Authorities. The only other Stone that I know of was destroyed on purpose by its creator ten thousand years ago."

Alright. So maybe I can find the stone. Otherwise everything that I learned here today is absolutely pointless...

"Subaru," Daphne said impatiently. "Come on! I gave you yours, now give me mine!"

Subaru blinked and realized that his own severed finger was still lying in his lap. He glanced at his hand and discovered that the bleeding had completely stopped.

Hurray for dream wounds, Subaru thought darkly to himself.

Subaru got to his feet and approached the crab-coffin, being careful to stay away from its sharp, scissor-like jaws.

Daphne opened her mouth wide. "Ahhh!" She sang, extending her tongue out as far as she could in anticipation.

Subaru looked at her sharp teeth with trepidation. *I mean, as long as her tongue is out, she can't bite me... right?*

Subaru carefully put the severed finger on her tongue.

Daphne jerked her tongue back inside her mouth like a frog and she snapped her jaws shut with a resounding crunch.

Subaru stumbled back, rubbing his wrist to reassure himself that he hadn't just lost a hand. Daphne was grinding through the severed digit with such gusto that Subaru was amazed that she hadn't broken her own teeth yet.

"Oh!" Daphne exclaimed in rapture. "It's so delicious! It's been so long since I've eaten. The memories! The *sensations*! The warmth of the sun, the sound of the wind! ...The scent of Emilia's skin!"

Subaru jerked back. *What?! What memories did she look at?!* His face twisted in outrage at this violation.

The crab-coffin visibly stiffened. "Wait," Daphne whispered, sounding shocked. "A silver haired half-elf? And why do you feel like..."

Daphne gasped.

Subaru frowned in concern. "Daphne?"

"You? ...You and her and... Oh..." She whispered in horror. "Oh no..."

The crab-coffin scuttled away a few feet.

Subaru squinted at Daphne. "What are you babbling about now?!" He growled.

"Liar!" Daphne shouted in a voice of desperation. "Liar, liar, liar! Not true! We all unmasked! All of us but you! Take it off! Take off your mask, you liar!"

Subaru shook his head in exasperation. "I'm not wearing a fucking mask, you dope!" He shouted.

"No mask...", Daphne whispered and the crab-coffin trembled. "No mask!" Her voice rose to a shriek.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Subaru demanded, walking over to the suddenly terrified witch.

"No!" Daphne screamed, the crab-coffin flinching back. "Not us, my king! Not us!"

The doors of Daphne's coffin slammed shut with a sound like thunder, concealing the witch in her black box and the crab-coffin quickly scuttled back into the misty underbrush and out of sight.

Subaru stared at the vanished witch in disbelief. "What the fuck was that all about?" He asked.

Then the world fell apart.

Subaru bolted upright in his bed. He sat there panting for breath, his heart racing.

"Subaru!" Emilia shouted. "Are you alright?!"

Subaru looked at Emilia and found her laying beside him under the covers. She was sweating profusely and shivering.

"Um," Subaru said slowly. "I... guess so. Where are we?"

Emilia sounded out of breath. "We're at the inn in Stoneybrooke. It's a little town in Gusteko," Emilia coughed. "Subaru, there's a bucket."

"A bucket?" He asked, noticing the bucket beside the bed.

Emilia nodded. "Anri said that after you woke up, you'd need to throw up," Emilia panted for a moment. "Do you?"

Subaru blinked. He thought about it for a moment. "No. Not at all, actually." He looked around the room. It appeared to be a small but spacious loft directly under a slanted roof. There were two beds and a small table in the room.

Subaru looked more closely at Emilia. She was pale and shivering. "What happened?" Subaru asked. "Where are we?"

Emilia took a deep breath. "We went to Iruk to get you some medicine for the Black Water's poison. But we got ambushed by an assassin and we had to run."

"An assassin?"

"It was Elsa, Subaru," Emilia whispered.

"*Elsa*?!" Subaru shouted. "You met Elsa?! Are you alright?!"

Emilia coughed and nodded feebly.

"You don't look alright!" Subaru said in concern. "What's wrong?"

Emilia shook her head. "I don't know... I feel sick."

"Sick how?" Subaru whispered.

Emilia struggled to lift the blankets off her body.

Subaru reached out to help her lift the covers but his left arm wasn't moving properly.

Subaru looked at it and almost passed out. While Subaru had never been muscular, his left arm now looked like it belonged on a twelve year old boy. It was thin as a rail and seemed drastically undersized.

"That's the result of the Black Water's poison," Emilia explained, following Subaru's gaze. "Anri says it can be repaired."

Subaru shuddered then put it out of mind for the moment. He lifted the bedspread.

Subaru gasped. Emilia was naked in bed. Black and red splotchy patches that looked like strange letters had crawled up Emilia's legs. They looked almost like fresh kanji tattoos but the edges of the patches were wet and as Subaru watched, the symbols wept blood and a thick sludge as black as pitch. Emilia had surrounded her body with towels to catch the fluid.

"What happened to you?!" He gasped.

Emilia shook her head. "I don't know."

Subaru clenched his teeth. "Where's Anri?"

Emilia seemed barely conscious. "She... left..."

"Figures. Just when she'd finally be useful!" Subaru hissed in a venomous voice.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I need to find you a doctor," Subaru said, climbing out of bed.

"No!" Emilia weakly grabbed his arm. Her hand felt like an oven on Subaru's skin. "We're in... Sanshi now, Subaru. This isn't a safe place for us. For me..."

"You need medicine!" Subaru protested, grabbing his robe and struggling to get his weakened arm into the sleeve.

Emilia shook her head. "If the locals find out an elf is here, we might both be in danger."

Subaru growled to himself. *If people find out that Emilia is here, we're in trouble because I doubt that it's safe to move her right now. But it's clear that Emilia is seriously ill. I can't just sit back and hope that this goes away on its own!*

He didn't know what to do. For a moment, Subaru forgot how to breathe. In desperation, he triggered *Reason and Judgment* and the world stilled all around him.

His terror faded and was replaced by a detached calm and an icy certainty.

Interesting. Whatever Anri has done seems to have inadvertently corrected your connection with Reason and Judgment. Or perhaps it was your encounter with the witch in your dream?

No matter.

You must focus on Emilia right now.

Emilia is clearly extremely sick. That must be your primary focus. Without question, exposing Emilia to the local healer is risky but it is a risk that must be taken and taken immediately.

Remain calm. Stay focused. And rely on Reason and Judgment to strengthen you as needed.

Subaru restarted time.

"Emilia, I need to find you a doctor," Subaru said firmly. "We'll deal with the fallout as it comes."

Emilia looked worried but she didn't say anything.

Subaru continued, "How big is this town?"

"Not nearly as big as Rixum, I think," Emilia said, shivering.

Not good but I suppose it could be worse. I need to find a healer willing to treat Emilia. And hopefully one willing to keep his mouth shut about an elf being here for a few gold coins.

Wait, gold coins...

"Mili, where's my satchel?" Subaru asked, looking around.

Emilia winched. "We lost it running from Elsa," She said quietly.

Subaru's face screwed up in frustration. "Shit! That's where all our money was! Now how are we supposed to buy-"

"Sub-" Emilia broke into a huge coughing fit and Subaru held her gently, trying to steady her as she coughed hard enough to shake her entire body. A minute or two later, she had caught her breath and pointing a trembling hand at the table where a bag sat. Subaru got up and glanced inside. He found it full of gold coins.

"We got your money pouch when we fled from the safe house," Emilia said in a hoarse voice. "But we didn't have time to get your satchel. Sorry," She murmured.

Subaru shook his head. "No problem," He bit his lip. "Hang on, I'll be right back. I want to grab a few things before I leave."

Subaru slipped out of the room.

A few minutes later, Subaru had placed a pitcher full of ice-water on the night-table along with a small cup.

He then stripped the other bed and wrapped all the blankets around the shivering Emilia.

He took a small cloth, wrapped ice-cubes inside it and laid it across Emilia's forehead.

"Do you need anything else before I go?" Subaru asked tenderly.

Emilia shook her head. "I'm fine... Subaru," She said shivering violently.

"Mili, you might just be the worst liar that I've ever met," Subaru said in a sinking voice.

Emilia smiled weakly. "Maybe I just don't want to lie to you," She said in a hoarse croak.

"You want me to get you some food before I go?" He suggested.

Emilia shook her head. "I'm not hungry right now, Subaru."

Subaru nodded. "Alright. Stay here and try to rest. I'll be back as soon as I can!"

It was mid afternoon when Subaru left the inn. He briefly popped into the stable to check on Patrasche, who was delighted to see her master back on his feet. Then he went searching for a doctor.

Stoneybrooke was a much smaller town than Rixum. There were only a few shops in the market.

Oh this is just great.

Fucking Anri! What was she thinking? Abandoning Mili at a time like this?!

Even if she didn't know a cure for her illness, she could have stayed here to change Mili's washcloth and help keep her temperature down! Now I'm running all over town and I need to worry that something might happen to Emilia without anyone even being there to help her!

Calm down. I'll just do this as fast as I can...

"Excuse me," Subaru said, calling out to a local at random.

"Um, yes?" The man had sandy blond hair and wore a white tunic.

"Is there a doctor in town?" Subaru asked.

"Yeah!" The man pointed. "Brother Cyril lives in the chapel just that way."

"Is he any good?" Subaru asked anxiously.

The man rocked his hand back and forth. "He's a low ranking spirits-art user. He's far from a master healer but he's all we got. Our only other option when we get sick is Nicholas. But medicine isn't really his forte."

"Who's Nicholas?" Subaru asked.

The man shrugged. "Old Nicholas is an alchemist," The man said with a deflating smile. "He was the fourth son of some noble and he spent his inheritance doing alchemical research a few miles from our village. He never quite made it work as I understand. I think that he's still here today so maybe he could make whatever medicinal potions you needed."

"An alchemist, you said?" Subaru said sharply.

The man chuckled. "Well, I'm not sure if I'd say that but he does. He might be able to help you out but I'd hurry if I were you. I think he's supposed to leave and visit his son down in Sibarrel today or tomorrow. His house is just a few miles out of town," He pointed.

Maybe I could make Emilia medicine? I know a bunch of potions from Daphne's memories. The problem is Daphne had no interest in medicine itself and I have no idea what's wrong with Emilia or what might make her better!

I'll start with Cyril and see how that goes...

Subaru nodded. "Hey, thanks a lot!"

The man nodded and kept walking.

A donation, a fee, *and* a tithe later, the exasperated Subaru was walking through town with Brother Cyril. Brother Cyril was a fat man with a florid face. He had a tonsured head and wore a loose, red robe.

"So that's all I know," Subaru explained as they walked. Subaru desperately wanted Cyril to hurry up but the fat man plodded along complacently.

"That sounds like a serious illness, my son," Cyril said pompously. "I might even suspect it's some manner of cursed wound."

"Cursed wound?"

"Curses can cause wounds and sores on the body, areas where the body fights to push out the poison. They often look like glyphs and letters as you described."

Curses... Daphne knew a potion that could mitigate and cure curses... But it's not that easy to make...

"Curses are extremely difficult to remove," Cyril said in a voice of anticipation. "This might take several treatments."

Subaru struggled not to break the man's teeth over the tones of raw greed that he heard in the monk's voice.

Let's get him to confirm the diagnosis and treatment first. Then I can handle this in whatever way seems sensible, Subaru thought as they walked into the inn.

The tap room at the inn was crowded for the lunch rush. "Hey, Brother," The innkeeper called from behind the bar. "The usual?"

"Not right now, Shaun! I need to heal the sick first!" Cyril said cheerfully.

Subaru closed his eyes and sighed. *Does medical confidentiality exist on this world?!*

"Sick!?" Shaun said sharply. "Who's sick?!"

Subaru took a deep breath. "My wife."

The innkeeper leaned over the bar. "It ain't catching, is it?" He all but growled at Subaru. "The last thing we need is some traveler bringing a pestilence to our little town!"

"No!" Subaru snapped back. "It's not contagious."

Shaun did not seem inclined to take Subaru's word for this and he glowered at him.

"No worries!" Cyril interjected. "If anyone gets sick, you have me to rely on!"

Nobody in the tap room seemed to find this idea reassuring.

Subaru followed Cyril up the stairs, wondering what kind of snake-oil salesman he had fallen in with.

"-of the most potent cures involves eel blood and moonlight," Cyril continued his discussion on curse remedies as Subaru led him into their room.

Subaru knew nothing about magic but he was starting to get the distinct impression he was wasting his time here.

"I'm back, Mili," Subaru called gently. "And I brought a doctor."

Emilia didn't answer and her breathing was shallow.

Subaru raced to her side. She was asleep and her face was pale.

"Well, let's see what we have here-" Cyril stopped talking abruptly.

Subaru looked at the monk. His jaw had dropped and his face pale.

Subaru checked a sigh. He lifted the blankets and showed Cyril Emilia's legs. The bloody marks were slowly creeping up her body. "These are the wounds I told you

about," Subaru prompted him.

Cyril stared in disbelief. "What is this?" He whispered.

Subaru sighed. "I'm not sure. We're been through a lot lately. I don't know what could have caused this but-"

"You brought a filthy half-blood into our town?!" Cyril hissed.

Subaru dropped the bedspread. He turned to face Cyril, his eyes glittering. "You're referring to my wife," He whispered. "She's very sick. And you are a healer, are you not?"

"I *am* a healer!" Cyril snapped. "I treat *people* not livestock!"

Subaru snarled at him.

Cyril shook his hand in disgust. "Your... *wife*?! You rut with this type of monster?! Taking a pig to your bed would have been more acceptable!"

Subaru took one step forward, raising his fist. Cyril stumbled backward suddenly looking afraid.

"Be careful," Subaru whispered in a voice as chill as death.

Cyril spat on the floor. "I will not waste one second of my time on this... abomination! You should be ashamed of yourself! Your filthy lust has led you to couple with an inhuman! You dirty the blood of all of humanity by your actions!"

Subaru ground his teeth and fantasized about spilling Cyril's filthy blood all over the floor.

No. That will just make the situation worse. I underestimated this place. I knew that Gusteko people didn't like demi-humans but I never imagined to what extent. Maybe Cyril is just a particularly virulent racist and everyone else in town will be more understanding but I doubt that I'll be that lucky.

This means that I need to get out of here. Maybe if we head back over the border I could find a healer in Lagunica who's not an absolute waste of skin.

Also I could try stopping at that "Nicholas's" house before we leave. He wouldn't need to see Emilia to make her a 'curse remedy' potion. It might not cure the condition but at least it will slow it down.

Then again, Nicholas sounds like the alchemist equivalent of a country bumpkin. He might not know how to make a curse remedy potion. Hell, maybe nobody remembers most of Daphne's potions after all these years.

Maybe I could rent his lab for an hour and cook it myself?

Whatever. I'll figure it out. The thing I need to do first is get Emilia and myself out of town before this situation comes to a boil.

Subaru snorted at him. "If you're not going to help us then get the hell out of here! You got paid for doing nothing but I got the impression from the other villagers that's how you make most of your money!"

Cyril looked mortally offended at this and he huffed and puffed before finally storming out of the room.

"Subaru," Emilia squeaked.

"Mili?!" Subaru spun around and saw Emilia lying there, blinking.

"What was all the noise?" She whispered.

"Nothing. The doctor wasn't much help," Subaru glossed over the details. "Mili, I think we might need to take you somewhere else to get you a good healer. The one in this village seems really... dumb."

"Where are we going to go?"

Subaru wasn't sure yet. "We'll stop and get you some medicine on our way out and then we'll hop the border back into Lagunica until we find you a healer."

Maybe Ganaks?

"But, Subaru-"

"Don't worry, Mili," Subaru laughed. "I have it all planned out!"

Emilia looked skeptical.

Subaru quickly changed the subject. "You look thirsty, Mili. Try to sit up and I'll pour you a drink," Subaru said, grabbing the pitcher full of ice water and pouring a glass. "I'll change your facecloth and then go pick up some food for the trip. We'll saddle Patrasche and get out of here."

Subaru started to bring the glass of water to Emilia but he noticed that she was still lying down in bed. Her face was horrified.

"Mili, is something wrong?"

Emilia looked up at Subaru in near terror then she bit her lip to try and hold the fear in check. "Subaru. I... I don't think that I can move my legs..."

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

Subaru felt the blood drain out of his face. "What do you mean?" He asked quietly.

Emilia's eyes were huge. "I mean, I can't move my *legs*!" Emilia's voice broke into a shrill scream.

Subaru quickly rushed to her side and shushed her.

Emilia nodded and looked nervously at the door.

"It's OK," Subaru said, using everything he had to keep his voice calm and steady.

"This... is a common *temporary* occurrence with these kind of curses," He lied.

"Really?" She whispered.

"Absolutely," He said, hoping he sounded more convincing than he felt. "There's no reason to worry yet."

Who am I kidding?! I have no idea if this is normal or how long it might last! What if it's permanent?!

Knock it off! Emilia needs you to be calm right now. She's the one freaking out so you have to be calm and reassuring.

Subaru slipped his hand under the bedsheets and found Emilia's foot. He gave her pinky toe a hard pinch.

"Ouch!" Emilia protested.

This made Subaru feel much better. *OK. So it's not... nerve damage... If the curse is affecting her muscles then that's likely to be temporary, right?*

As soon as the curse runs its course, Emilia will be back on her feet...

But that could take weeks. Months!

Subaru swallowed hard and nodded. "OK. This looks like a very temporary situation," He said awkwardly. "We just need to give you time to recover."

Emilia closed her eyes. "Subaru, we're on the run! The whole world is after us!" She whispered in despair. "If I can't walk-"

"We have Patrasche!" Subaru reminded her. "You don't need to walk to wherever we're going! Look, I think that you're just making trouble for yourself by acting like this might be a long term thing. It might go away in a couple of days! But even if it does take longer, we'll handle it. As long as we're together..." Subaru trailed off expectantly.

Emilia didn't respond. She sat there staring down at her clasped hands.

Subaru felt a catch in his throat.

Subaru had spent close to half an hour soothing Emilia's hysterics. She finally calmed down but that was more likely due to exhaustion than anything that Subaru had done.

He held her tight as her eyes slowly fluttered closed and she went to sleep. Then he left the room.

Subaru stood alone in the empty hall. He took a deep breath, squatted down, and buried his face in his hands.

Oh my god! What the fuck am I doing to do?!

Emilia can't walk! She's right! We're on the fucking run for our lives! Emilia can't sit on Patrasche safely if she can't use her legs, I'll have to hold her! And that'll still be dangerous if we need to run away fast! If Patrasche makes a sharp turn, we could all get dumped on the ground!

Worse, what about the spirits?! I can't take Emilia with me to try and rescue Beatrice and Puck but I can't safely leave her behind either! She can't take care of herself if I leave her all alone for days on end if she can't walk!

How did I let everything spiral so far out of control?!

A panicked scream bubbled up deep inside of him and when he couldn't hold it anymore he triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Subaru's worries drifted away like smoke.

Subaru didn't think about anything. He just sat there, savoring the freedom from his own fears and doubts.

You need to get a grip on yourself. Emilia's condition certainly complicates matters but handling complications is what skilled leaders do.

Subaru left *Reason and Judgment* with a sigh.

I can do this, He thought. I have to do this. Emilia needs me to do this.

I'm all that she has left. That means, I have to be enough...

Subaru took a deep breath and stood up.

Alright. So we'll get out here quick. Buy some food from a shop, saddle Patrasche, and then we'll take off. A quick stop at Nicholas's to make some medicine and we'll go.

...But is that the best idea? Emilia has only been sick for a day at most and she's already paralyzed from the waist down! How fast could this curse progress? Maybe I need to lay in a stock of medicine. I wonder how much I could buy from Nicholas. Or conversely how much time in his lab I could buy and how much I could make?

Subaru was clomping down the stairs when he suddenly became aware of raised voices.

He emerged into the tap room on the first floor and found the place absolutely swarming with people.

Brother Cyril stood on a small table, haranguing the locals. As Subaru appeared on the stairs, Cyril stopped talking and glared up at Subaru with loathing. Most of the people in the tap room followed suite.

Subaru swallowed hard. *Pretty sure I know what they're talking about. This is a problem. Indomitable is an overwhelming ability but it does have limitations. A single powerful foe is easily handled but it doesn't work well on trash mobs that swarm. There must be sixty people in this room and they're all armed. They're armed with farming tools and whatever else they could find but they're armed.*

If the crowd just rushes me, I'll kill plenty of them but there's only five seconds before they'll tear me apart.

I need to scare them before it gets that far. The problem with my power is that cooldown. I not only need to kill somebody but I need to make sure that everyone sees me kill them and panics before this mob gives into blood lust and stops thinking.

Subaru tried to defuse the situation. "So, we're going to be leaving. My wife needs a doctor and I'm going to head back into Lagunica to find one."

"You're going nowhere!" Shaun shouted up the stairs. He held a butcher's knife in his hands and he raised it over his head.

A group of other voices muttered in agreement.

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "Come again?"

"You're a disgusting degenerate!" A woman cried out to more sounds of agreement.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I've been called worse. How about my wife and I just clear out of this village and you won't have to worry about us anymore?"

"Your wife?" Cyril snorted. "Do you call your riding dragon your wife as well?"

Subaru's hands made fists. "We're leaving," He hissed. "That's all you should care about."

"You're going nowhere!" Shaun shouted again. "You've disgraced all of humanity by plowing a dirty demi-human's gash! She'll be put down like any other beast and you'll be strung up by your balls."

Subaru's brain erupted in flames and he slowly descended the stairs. He knew that placing himself where he could be surrounded like this was unwise but he was simply too angry to think straight. "You are coming dangerously close to the limits of my patience," He whispered.

"You're a freak!" Cyril said, pointing at him as if sentencing a criminal. "Our people killed the Witch of Ruin centuries ago and since then, Gusteko has been a paradise for the pureblooded human race! We're not about to let you lizard-fucking southerners bring your mutts up here! We'll string you both from a tree as a warning to outsiders!"

The crowd roared in agreement.

Subaru's rage exploded.

His Authority surged to life but it found itself... strangely thwarted. A great pressure built up in Subaru's heart as he bit back a cry of pain.

This pain was unfamiliar to Subaru but it was something that all of the Archbishops could have easily identified.

Subaru now had two Authorities. He was remarkably compatible with the Authority of Pride. So much so that in the strictest sense, he had never suffered any damage from bearing it at all.

However, he was largely *incompatible* with Gluttony.

This was not especially uncommon. Extremely few people are compatible with more than one Authority, much less ever get the chance to *hold* more than one. Under normal circumstances, Subaru's second Authority would remain dormant. When he finally died, it would simply abandon him and wait for a new host.

However, Daphne's intervention had awakened the Authority of Gluttony. By teaching Subaru so many lessons about hunger and desire and satiation, Daphne had unknowingly increased his compatibility with the Authority. Now the two Authorities contended deep inside of Subaru's soul.

Ordinarily, Gluttony could never have opposed the mighty power of Pride. It was like a wild boar attacking a dragon. But Daphne's interference had changed the picture somewhat, as did the massive amount of poison that Subaru had absorbed from the Black Water and never successfully removed from his body. The Black Water's poison was manifested by Gluttony and it now served to empower Gluttony. The battle was like a wild boar in an arena that was filling up with mud and water, attacking a dragon which could not swim.

They each fought and struggled with neither giving in nor gaining ground.

Finally, just as it seemed that they would both rip their host to pieces, Pride and Gluttony joined forces and a new power was born.

Subaru suddenly knew a new term as if it was engraved on his very soul

Endless Hunger.

Shaun was the first. He raised his butcher cleaver high and marched over toward the degenerate stranger. Shaun wasn't sure himself if he was going to try to capture him or just bury the blade in his skull.

The fool stood there, as if wrestling with some intractable mental problem.

Shaun reached the stranger and raised his cleaver high over his head.

Every light in the inn went out at once. The cheerily burning fire on the hearth blew out like a candle.

Shaun staggered back. The room had become freezing. An icy wind had begun to blow inside the closed up inn. A wind that seemed to be trying to drag everything closer to the stranger.

Shaun's eyes widened in fear. Where before the stranger had looked like a normal man, now he was nothing but a shadowy blur. Shaun found himself buffeted by a maelstrom of unseen forces, forces that were all trying to inexorably drag him closer to the stranger. The entire world became dark and blurry, as if he was looking at everything through the clear water of a raging river that thundered toward the stranger from all directions.

Shaun looked around at his familiar inn and the neighbors that he'd lived beside all his life and found himself trapped in an alien world. Colors faded from the world around him and shapes melted into obscene distortions, every object revealing a hidden and somehow hideous nature unseen by normal eyes. The people were screaming but sounds faded to whispers in the gloom. His friends and neighbors were unrecognizable, their faces nothing but shadowy smears. The world around him felt like it had been opened up and turned inside out. Shaun felt like he could see all of the secrets of the world and none of its beauty.

Shaun fought to pull away from this monster in disguise but it was like being chest deep in a raging river. There was a force pulling him closer to the shadow-man.

The crowd fought to pull away and flee. Some of them succeeded. The monster's power seemed to diminish with distance.

A few paces behind, Shaun heard a querulous moan. He turned and saw a slender woman collapse to her knees. Her face and body were a shadowy smear but Shaun recognized the contours of her maid costume. It was Jill, his employee of many years.

"Jill!" Shaun shouted. "What's wrong?!"

"I don't know!" Jill moaned. "My body... feels heavy..."

Shaun was also struggling to stay on his feet as most of the others ran for their lives. Shaun felt a bone-deep weariness that had him struggling not to fall to the ground. The crowd fought their way through the door. The crowd pressed against the doorway, everyone fighting to get away from this madness.

They fled the inn, screaming about the end of the world.

Shaun turned back to face the monster and he felt a hand seize him by his throat and lift him up off his feet.

Shaun stared down at the monster whose face was nothing but a shadowy blur.

"You dare?" The monster murmured in a deep, inhuman voice. It was the kind of voice that one would imagine echoing out of a tomb. "You dare offer threat to my bride?"

Shaun could barely breathe. He tried to kick at the monster but his legs felt as if they were made of straw. Moving them at all took herculean effort and his kick faltered into feebly swinging his foot back and forth.

"By mine right of succession," The monster whispered. "And the sovereignty of my throne, I claim what is rightfully mine."

The walls around the monster began to glisten with silver as streaks of frost spread across the walls, freezing them solid.

Shaun's eyes widened in horror. The monster was... doing *something* to him. Shaun felt like a barrel that had sprung a leak. Something was being drawn out of him, slowly and inexorably. With each passing moment, breathing became more challenging. His eyes didn't want to stay open.

The monster was opening Shaun, emptying Shaun. Leaving him a shriveled husk.

Jill struggled to lift her head off the floor.

A few moments later, the room was as cold as the Gusteko forest in midwinter. Frost coated the entire room and the monster dropped Shaun, or rather Shaun's body to the floor with a thud. He had gone from a hale and hearty man in his prime to a cadaver that looked as though it had died of starvation and exposure in the winter cold.

The monster looked at Jill for a moment. Everyone else had managed to flee the inn.

"Please," Jill begged in a whisper, uncertain what she was begging for or from whom.

A moment later, the monster simply turned around and walked back up the stairs. The swirling vortex went with it and vanished as the monster left the room. The roaring fire on the hearth and the candles all leaped back into dancing flame. The room became warm and balmy again, just incongruously covered in frost.

Jill sat there, panting for breath and crying in fear. Every fiber of her being desperately wanted to leap to her feet and run away but her strength didn't even start to recover until the monster had left.

Thus she was forced to sit there while her strength slowly returned to her, trembling and hoping that she would be long gone before the monster returned.

Subaru stood on the second floor of the inn, his heart racing. He dismissed the *Endless Hunger* with a thought and he stood there, panting for long moments.

The black color swathing him faded and Subaru's face and body became visible again. The unnatural cold in the inn ended.

What the hell was that?! Why did I turn into an ink-blot test?!

And what was I doing to those people? I looked at them and... they just fell down!

And I felt that innkeeper's... something pass into me. It was just like what Daphne took from Jenevieve after she died. What is it?

No. Fuck it. That doesn't matter now.

Emilia is in danger. I need to get her out of here.

Subaru took a moment to calm himself and put a calm smile on his face and then he entered their room.

Emilia was unconscious and breathing fast.

"Mili," Subaru shook her.

She didn't make a sound.

Subaru lifted the bedspread and now saw that the strange black and red marks on Emilia's white skin were profusely weeping blood and black sludge. Worse, they now ran down both legs and they were beginning to climb her pelvis.

Subaru bit his lip hard. *No. Medicine first. She needs medicine before I can do anything else.*

What caused this? The Black Water?

Seems like as good a candidate as anything but what can I do about that?

Never mind. First I need to make her some curse remedies.

I'll get Emilia out of here and then we'll go visit that Nicholas guy.

Subaru quickly saddled Patrasche and left her outside in front of the inn.

The townspeople were gathered a long distance away from the inn, pointing at Subaru in terror.

Something tells me that we won't be able to expect a warm welcome in Gusteko any time soon.

Oh well. It's cold here and the people suck. I've heard that Kararagi is nice.

This actually isn't all that bad. We were ready to leave anyway. The only problem is that we have no food. I need to find Emilia a doctor who treats curses and, assuming Brother Cyril had the slightest idea what he was talking about, most healers can't do that. I don't even know where to begin looking for a curse specialist. Does this world have a medical college?

So we may have another quest in front of us to treat one of Emilia's afflictions and once again we have no idea where to go and we have absolutely nothing eat.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Subaru raced inside and ran up stairs. He bundled Emilia's limp body in blankets and picked her up in a bridal carry.

I guess I shouldn't worry about stealing the blankets when I already murdered the innkeeper...

Subaru left the bedroom. *Has Emilia just lost a lot of weight lately? I mean... I've held her before but I shouldn't be strong enough to carry her like this. Not without feeling a strain.*

She feels feather light for some reason. Lucky me. Otherwise there's no way I could carry her with only one arm. My shriveled left arm is barely able to provide enough force to keep her from flipping over.

Subaru gently carried Emilia down the stairs, stepping carefully over the innkeeper's withered body and emerged outside.

Patrasche was waiting there, looking darkly at the terrified villagers cowering in the distance.

The earth dragon looked at Subaru and instantly descended to her knees to make it easier for him to mount while carrying Emilia.

Subaru climbed on top of Patrasche and set himself, making sure that he was holding onto Emilia securely.

Patrasche got to her feet and Subaru cast a final look of loathing at the frantic townspeople.

The townspeople saw him glowering at them and they scattered.

This made Subaru feel slightly better.

He kicked Patrasche and the earth dragon raced out of the village.

Nicholas was an old man in an empty house, many miles from the nearest town. His wife had died decades ago and his son had moved far away to the east to make a fresh start with his life. This meant that Nicholas rarely saw him or his grandchildren.

Nicholas had inherited the house. It was an old summer home that his noble family used frequently when he was a boy. His older brothers had no interest in the old place so they gave it to Nicholas when their father died. Nicholas had loved this house since he was a boy but a three bedroom home was too much for an old man to keep up with and it was gradually falling into disrepair.

This was the reason that he was looking forward to tomorrow's visit to see his son in Sibarrel. Ever since his wife had passed away, there wasn't much for him to do around here and he struggled to make ends meet.

There was a knock at the door.

Nicholas jumped to his feet and scrambled to the door as fast as his old and fat body allowed.

Maybe little Nell has colic again! I mean, poor dear but a few copper coins would mean a lot these days!

Nicholas flung the door wide. "Hello! Welcome to-" Nicholas trailed off. Standing in front of him was a young man that he'd never seen before. One of his arms appeared to be shriveled.

"You're Nicholas?" The young man asked bluntly.

"Um. Yes, indeed I am, sir," Nicholas said, thrown slightly off step. It wasn't precisely unheard of for travelers to come and see Nicholas for medicine but it was awfully rare. "Can I help you?" He asked, stepping away from the door and inviting the visitor inside. "I have a variety of extremely useful potions! These range from..." Nicholas trailed off as the young man completely ignored him.

The stranger walked into the nearby laboratory that was Nicholas's pride and joy.

The young man examined the equipment closely.

The lab was an enormous room with a gigantic table occupying the middle. The table was covered in a complex layout of interconnected flasks all connected by delicate tubing. The only other furniture in the room was a desk in the corner covered with Nicholas's disorganized notes and a pair of easy chairs. One for when Nicholas was tired-

And one chair from the days when his wife had still been here to keep him company and ensure that he ate at least periodically...

Nicholas looked at the chair and felt a wave of nostalgia sweep over him until he brought his focus back on the boy.

Nicholas watched the stranger pace around the lab, studying everything intently.

Nicholas fidgeted in discomfort. Normally, Nicholas would have simply ordered the boy to get away from his delicate equipment but the stranger looked fairly well-off. Nicholas didn't want to precipitate anything. A few silver coins could feed Nicholas for weeks.

"I have a wonderful cure-potion," Nicholas hinted. "It works on everything from headaches to aching muscles to providing relief for broken bones!"

The young man ignored him and inspected all of Nicholas's equipment and even went through his storage room of supplies and provisions.

The young man finally nodded. "This all looks satisfactory. Not exactly ideal but it will have to do," The young man said finally. He turned back to Nicholas and gave him a look as sharp as a blade. "I want to buy your house and all your equipment."

This was the very last thing that Nicholas had expected today. "You... *what?*!" He asked in disbelief.

"I want to buy your lab. Right now. Today. Twenty gold coins," The young man said.

Nicholas's jaw dropped. This was at least five times what he had thought he could get for the place. The land and the big but poorly maintained house were probably worth less than three gold coins combined. The sophisticated equipment in his lab had some value but it was decades old and it was too fragile to ship safely. No one would buy it from him.

"Um. I'll need some time to think about it, my lord," Nicholas said uncertainly. This was the deal of a lifetime. He could move down to Sibarrel and be with his son. But Nicholas was an old man and he didn't care for things that happened *too* fast.

"I'll make it thirty gold coins if you leave here in less than an hour with intent not to return," The young man said bluntly.

That was good enough for Nicholas. "I'll just... pack my things then, my lord," He said weakly.

"Don't bring any of the lab equipment or supplies," The young man muttered. "I need them."

The boy walked back outside. Nicholas watched them leave with a baffled shake of his head. Then he turned to his belongings and started trying to figure out how much of his life he could remove from the house in an hour.

With an hour to kill, Subaru walked back into the forest. About a quarter mile into the woods, he found Patrasche laying in a clearing. The sleeping Emilia was leaning against her.

Subaru patted Patrasche's face. "Thanks for watching her for me, girl," He murmured.

Patrasche clucked appreciatively.

Subaru gently lifted Emilia off of Patrasche and laid her head on his lap.

If Emilia was at all aware that she was being moved, there was no sign.

"OK, Mili," Subaru sighed. "So... here's the plan. We need to find you a doctor. Or a healer. Or whatever they're called around here. The problem is that that... asshole I hired in the village thinks that these are cursed wounds and I think that I believe him. They're certainly not natural. Apparently curses aren't easy to treat and heal so the doctors who can handle them are scarce. I don't even know where to start looking yet. But the disease is progressing quickly. We can't just take off and run around in circles. So, I just bought us a house.

Subaru made a face. "This is a *big* step in our relationship, Mili," Subaru said with a rueful smile. "I just wish that you were awake for it.

"Anyway, there's a decent lab in this house. Not as good a lab as I would have *liked* but I can make some basic medicine for you here. We'll build up a little supply to stabilize you and then we'll go hunting for a doctor."

Subaru frowned. "Oh. Wait a minute. I never even got a chance to tell you about Daphne, did I? Boy, do we have a lot to talk about when you wake up."

Subaru sighed and waited.

Subaru cradled Emilia for just under an hour and then he left her with Patrasche again and returned to Nicholas's home. The old man was tossing items out the door and into a small, hand-drawn cart.

As Subaru approached, Nicholas emerged from the house carrying a heavy bag over his shoulder and wearing several heavy coats. He put a few more things in the hand-drawn cart and cheerfully handed Subaru a key. "Here you go!"

"Thank you," Subaru stood up to take the key and handed Nicholas thirty gold coins.

Nicholas looked delighted with the transaction. He lifted the front of the cart and slowly trundled off down the road with a broad smile.

"I sure hope that he's not going to stop for lunch in Stoneybrooke," Subaru murmured. "It wouldn't be hard for the locals to put two and two together..."

Subaru returned to where Emilia and Patrasche waited. Since getting himself and Emilia back in the saddle for such a short walk seemed a little silly, he gently lifted Emilia into his arms and carried her back to the house. Patrasche followed.

OK, so earlier I thought that Emilia was light as a feather. Now for some reason she feels her normal weight again. I'm starting to regret not riding Patrasche back.

Why did she feel so light before? Was it just adrenaline? No, something weird is going on here.

"Wait here for a second, girl," Subaru murmured to Patrasche. "I'll put Emilia down and then I'll find a place for you."

Patrasche shook like a big dog but aside from that she made no objection.

Subaru stepped into the house. It was a two story home. The first floor appeared to have two large rooms on it and two smaller ones. One had been converted to a fairly comfortable sitting room, the other had been re-purposed into a lab. There was also a small kitchenette and a small bedroom with a pair of old bunk beds.

All of these rooms were bigger than Emilia's whole cottage.

"OK. Let's take a look upstairs. I don't know about you, Mili but I don't want to sleep in bunk beds. Maybe we'll save those for when Felt and Garf come visit."

Subaru made the joke without thinking but his heart felt leadened.

Felt and Garf. And Reinhard. Will we ever see any of you again?

And if we do, will it be as friends or enemies?

Subaru carried Emilia up the steep stairs to the second floor. The upper level was small but there were two bedrooms and a bathroom.

Damn. What luxury. When was the last time I took a shower? It might have been weeks by now.

Subaru stepped into the master bedroom. "Well, one downside of getting Nicholas out of here so fast was that apparently he didn't have time to make his bed this morning."

Subaru inspected the bed carefully, looking for stains, fleas, or anything else nasty before quickly making the bed and putting Emilia on top of it. He tightly wrapped her up in blankets until she looked swaddled. "OK, Mili. I don't really have time to change the sheets right now. I need to start making medicine. So you just stay bundled up here and let me go start cooking something to make you feel better. I'll worry about doing laundry and making beds while it cooks. Speaking of cooking, I wonder if there's anything to eat around here. We're going to get very very hungry very soon."

Subaru got Emilia as comfortable as he could and then he raced down the steep stairs to the lab.

He frowned at the enormous table covered with a complex web of tubes and interconnected flasks and beakers, going over the ingredients and steps in his mind necessary to produce *Vitae*.

This is so strange. I never took a chemistry class in my life. I have no idea what any of this equipment does. Except... I do. Daphne memories tell me exactly what all this equipment does and what I should do with it even though there's no reason that I should know.

It's weird.

Not long after, Subaru had reassembled the equipment into a new configuration.

Around here, there's no such thing as Bunsen burners. They have enchanted ceramic tiles that they use to generate heat for the flasks and beakers. Good thing I have Daphne's memories because I never would have figured that out otherwise.

Finally, Subaru had seventeen different ingredients slowly bubbling their way through a maze of interconnected tubes and toward a final destination. A liquid that looked black as pitch was collecting in the final beaker.

Umbra is just the first step. Once I have a supply I can refine Vitae from it but even the Umbra will take a few hours to cook.

Shit. I need to find a place to put Patrasche.

Subaru found a dilapidated old stable behind the house. Patrasche and Subaru inspected it closely. It was old, small, and in poor repair but it did not seem like it was ready to collapse just yet.

"Sorry, Patrasche, it's the best we've got," He shrugged.

Patrasche took a look around the musty old stable and then gave Subaru a disapproving honk.

"I know, I know," Subaru sighed. "I'll try to do better."

The dragon snorted.

Subaru put a cold facecloth on Emilia's head and then went downstairs to look for food. Nicholas's kitchen was pretty bare but there looked like there were enough vegetables to last them a few days.

Lucky, I more or less know how to make vegetable soup, Subaru grumbled to himself, trying to peel a few vegetables and struggling at it. If there were steak cuts here, I'd probably turn them into charcoal just trying to figure out how to cook them!

The cook-fire was out cold. Subaru gathered some twigs from the nearby woodpile and build up kindling.

At least the woodpile looks well stocked.

Subaru had to start a fire which was not something that he'd ever had to worry about before. *Normally either Emilia, Puck, or Beatrice would start it using magic. I don't know how 'normal' people in this world start fires. Maybe I should invent a cigarette lighter...*

In irritation, Subaru went into the lab, took one of the 'Bunsen burner' ceramic tiles and brought it back into the kitchen. He cranked up the tile to max heat and shoved it into the kindling until it caught fire.

"Well," Subaru muttered, pulling out the tile and returning it to the lab. "Not exactly the intended use but effective all the same."

Subaru sat next to Emilia while the food and medicine cooked. Emilia was sleeping deeply. She hadn't woken up the entire time that they'd been here. He had sat by her side for hours, changing her facecloth and desperately trying to keep her cool. The black marks were spreading. They had nearly reached her stomach.

Subaru went down to the lab and checked the final vessel in the chain. A black liquid was slowly collecting in the flask.

He watched closely as the last few drops dripped into the tube.

Alright. This should be enough Umbra to make a decent amount of Vitae. Luckily, making Vitae from Umbra is pretty quick. But I need to take my time and be thorough. Umbra is highly toxic and that's the last thing Emilia needs right now.

Subaru placed the jar on an enchanted ceramic tile and hit the symbols to crank up the heat to the max.

The jar began to boil and steam. Subaru coughed at the intensely foul odor and stumbled away to open the window. After a moment's thought, he walked around the lab and opened *all* the windows.

Subaru gave the process a few minutes until the cloud of steam thinned. When he returned, he found the jar had boiled dry and left a large pile of gleaming black crystals behind.

Subaru grabbed the jar of *Umbra* crystals tightly in his hands. *This was a special trick of Daphne's...*

Subaru took a deep breath and concentrated. Without fully understanding how or what he was doing, he forced his Authority to remove the spark of life that he had stolen from the innkeeper and press it into the receptive black crystals. It made the chemical mixture in the jar something more than just chemicals. It transformed the remaining salts into something that interacted with the natural mana of this world in a special way.

The gleaming black crystals took on a faint but unmistakable violet glow.

That's done it.

Subaru checked the supply closet and discovered another surprise.

Shit! Nicholas's lab isn't badly stocked but he has barely any sal-ammoniac. That means that I can make as much Umbra as I want but I can't refine much Vitae! I have enough to make a few batches and that's it. Daphne remembers sal-ammoniac as being pretty rare and that means pretty expensive. She knew a way to make it from scratch but that would require some serious equipment that Nicholas doesn't have.

Although, I just used up all the life-force that I stole from the innkeeper so maybe it's not an issue...

Whatever. I have what I need for right now. I'll have to deal with this problem later.

Subaru transferred the Umbra crystals to an almost comically large glass container.

Subaru grabbed a scale and carefully weighed the sal-ammoniac, slowly pushing the excess white-crystal salt back into the bag.

When he had the right amount, he slowly and carefully poured the crystal salt into the large vial.

Then he placed the vial on a burner, cranked up the heat, and stood well back, hovering by the wide-open window.

The sal-ammoniac was melting into a white liquid, coating the black crystals and dissolving them. The mixture began to spit and boil furiously. It drove itself into a bubbling froth and the mixture started to climb up the sides of the container. The vial emitted a thick, acrid white smoke that reeked of urine.

For a moment, Subaru worried that the beaker wasn't big enough to contain the reaction and that the volatile chemicals might spill out which would be a disaster but the reaction slowly calmed down.

The white mixture inside the beaker slowly turned a vivid electric blue and developed a faint glow.

The reaction seemed to be finished but Subaru kept his distance for several minutes, waiting for the toxic byproducts to disperse and the excess liquid to evaporate.

When Subaru finally returned to the mixture and shut off the burner, nothing was left but a tiny amount of glowing blue liquid, possibly enough to fill a pair of shot glasses.

This is... about two Years of Vitae I think... That's more than I could usually get from a single person without the Stone...

Subaru measured out two years with a measuring spoon and then deposited it in two tiny vials.

Subaru held up the tiny vial with a single year of stolen life inside of it.

Emilia drinking this will transfer a year of life that the innkeeper would have had to her. That might be enough to cure the curse.

No it won't, His own mind replied dryly. Vitae is only a healing potion in the sense that it provides time and time heals all wounds. But time doesn't cure all conditions. If you gave a man dying of cancer a century of life, it wouldn't cure his cancer because his body can't heal that condition even given infinite time. It will just delay his death. And worse, because he is dying and the effect gets worse not better over time, he won't get the full century. He'll get a small fraction of that time.

Emilia is the same way. Her body can't heal a curse so giving her Vitae is nothing more than a delaying tactic.

Subaru made a face. "Well... at least this will stall the damage for a while. The curse won't be able to damage her any further until its damage consumes the year. Even if what's afflicting Emilia is a particularly vicious curse, a year of *Vitae* should last us... seven months easily before the curse consumes it. That should be enough time to find a healer for her."

Subaru paused. "Actually, maybe I should test it first..."

Subaru picked up one of the vials and he poured it on his shriveled arm.

The limb glowed blue for an instance and then began to swell. The wizened limb spasmed and shook and Subaru grit his teeth against the unfamiliar itching sensation of muscles rapidly growing.

In seconds, Subaru's left arm was a perfect match for his right.

Subaru smirked. *A year of healing in seconds...*

Subaru started to turn away from the lab table then he hesitated. "I should probably cook some more *Umbra*," He muttered. "We can take it with us when we leave. I don't have any more life-force right now but I might find some more later and then we could make more *Vitae*."

Subaru quickly reset and resupplied the chemical process to brew more *Umbra* while he was gone.

I'm burning through a lot of Nicholas's supplies. I'll need to find someplace to restock soon.

Maybe Ganaks? It's probably the closest city.

Subaru sighed. "OK. If Daphne's memories are correct," He said to no one. "This *should* pause whatever curse Emilia was exposed to."

Subaru took the vial of blue liquid and headed upstairs.

As the sun set, Subaru entered the master bedroom with the medicine.

Emilia lay in bed unconscious, her breathing shallow.

"OK, Mili. Time to wet your lips. This should help you feel better."

Subaru slipped his arms around Emilia's shoulder, helping her sit up.

Emilia moaned. Her body felt like a furnace and she weakly tried to push Subaru away.

Subaru sucked in a breath through his teeth when he saw that the strange, weeping black markings were now on Emilia's stomach and running down both legs.

Subaru slowly and carefully poured the tiny cup into Emilia's mouth.

Emilia took a deep breath and seemed to relax almost instantly. Her face lightened and she smiled in her sleep. Her head rested on Subaru's shoulder and she snuggled against him for a moment before drifting back into deeper sleep.

I think that might have worked.

Subaru gently helped her lie down and wrapped the blankets around her.

He quickly checked the black marks. They were still all over her lower body but he thought that they might look a bit drier than a few minutes ago. It was probably too soon to tell.

"Hang on, Mili. Supper will be ready soon. Also, I need to see if I can find some clean sheets in this house and make the bed."

Subaru did find some clean sheets in the closet.

He gently carried Emilia to the other upstairs bedroom and laid her down while he changed the sheets in the master bedroom.

Making beds was not one of Subaru's talents and he made it *far* more difficult than it needed to be but he got it done.

Subaru brought Emilia back into the master bedroom and tucked her into a clean bed.

Then he went downstairs and took the soup off the fire.

He poured two bowls and brought them upstairs. He was forced to walk carefully as he carried them up the steep steps without a free hand on the railing to steady him.

I'm glad we made broth tonight. Emilia's body needs fuel and I can get her to drink broth a sip at a time even if she is asleep.

Man, I'm starving. I mean, this soup doesn't look all that special but my stomach is growling! I can't remember the last time we ate something that wasn't rations or just whatever we could find lying around.

The closest thing was that 'stew' that Emilia made the other night. The one that was more solid than most casseroles!

I love Emilia to death but she is not a cook.

Huh. I guess I better learn how to do it then. Nobody else is going to feed us.

The next few months could be very interesting...

Subaru put one bowl down on the night-table and pulled a chair up to Emilia's bedside.

Huh. Do I eat or do I feed Mili first?

Subaru was fairly certain that the right decision was to feed *her* first but his stomach was making very loud noises right now.

He sat there in indecision.

Emilia murmured in her sleep and then slowly opened her eyes.

"Subaru?" She whispered.

"Emilia!" Subaru sprang to his feet. "Are you alright? How are you feeling?" He asked eagerly.

Emilia thought about it for a moment. "I feel... funny," Emilia admitted, trying to sit up in bed but needing Subaru's help to do so. "When did I fall asleep?"

Subaru hesitated. "You've been very sick, Emilia," He said slowly. "You've been asleep almost all day. Remember those... weird marks we found on your leg?"

Emilia blinked and pulled off the covers with a gasp when she saw the strange black markings all over both legs and her lower torso.

Subaru was comforted to note that the markings all looked dry and had stopped spreading, at least for now.

That's a good sign anyway. "How do you feel, Emilia? Are you any in pain?" Subaru asked, feeling her forehead. Her fever seemed to have broken.

Emilia thought for a moment. "No. I'm not in any pain but I do feel... funny," She said again. "I think that there's something wrong with my mana."

"Your mana?" Subaru asked in surprise.

He thought about it. "Well... Maybe the curse attacks you through your mana?"

"Curse?" Emilia asked. "You mean the curse that made everyone forget me?"

Subaru coughed. "Oh. I guess with everything going on, I forgot to mention that. Um, good news about that, Mili. I got some new information. It turns out that you're *not* cursed. Your name has been *eaten*."

"*What?*!" Emilia blinked in confusion, processing the strange concept. She frowned at him. "Subaru, who told you that?"

Subaru scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Um. Well, funny story," He hedged. "See, while I was unconscious from the Black Water, I sort of met a witch..."

"You did *what?*!" Emilia's eyes grew huge.

Subaru put up his hands. "Look, I don't understand it either. She says that she found me in my dreams by... following my Authority or something."

Emilia looked skeptical. "Subaru, are you sure that you weren't just dreaming?"

Subaru snorted. "No way. She's the one who gave me the recipe for your medicine. And a bunch of other recipes too."

Emilia frowned, considering that. "How did she know I was sick?"

Subaru shook his head. "I don't think she did," He sighed. "We... bargained. She gave me all her recipes and I gave her copies of my memories because she was hungry."

Emilia looked at him in confusion.

He sighed. "Yeah, I don't get it either. But anyway, she suggested that she knew a way to cure your condition. She says that there's a potion called *Anima* that could cure you."

Emilia's eyes brightened for the first time in days. "Really?" Emilia said in excitement.

Subaru held up his hand to forestall her excitement. "Yeah," he said. "But it's *tough* to make. It might take me a while to be able to do it..."

Emilia's smile was huge. "But at least we know how to cure me now!"

Subaru chuckled. "Yup. We have a plan. Finally."

Subaru couldn't help smiling. Emilia looked truly happy for the first time in he couldn't remember how long.

Now all I need to do is admit to her that in order to make this potion I'll need to spend years if not decades and god knows how much money doing alchemy to create a mystic artifact or we need to find said artifact that once belonged to an ancient witch and that artifact has been lost for four hundred years...

"Anyway," Subaru continued. "So, when you got sick, I consulted an incompetent healer in Stoneybrooke and he told me that your wounds were likely the result of a curse."

"An incompetent healer?" Emilia raised an eyebrow.

Subaru shrugged. "He was the best I could find," He admitted. "Anyway, if that curse really is attacking your mana then maybe we can use your mana levels to measure the disease's progress. How much magic do you think you have right now?"

Emilia raised her arms and concentrated for a moment.

Her eyes widened in shock. "Nothing. I... I don't have *any* magic..." She breathed.

Subaru's jaw dropped. "What?! Oh, Mili, I'm so sorry!"

Emilia was quiet for a long time. Finally, she looked up at Subaru. "Why are you sorry?" She asked quietly.

Subaru bit his lip. "It'll be OK. This is probably temporary! Just a result of the poison and the medicine. You'll get your magic back," Subaru assured her.

Emilia chuckled ruefully. "I'm just fine with this, actually."

Subaru blinked. "Huh?"

Emilia gave her a sad smile. "Subaru, my whole life, all I could ever do with my magic was hurt people. I don't have healing magic. My magic just curses people and wounds them. For the first time in my life... I actually feel free of my magic," She said in a tone of wonder. "I don't have to be afraid of hurting you or anyone else by mistake anymore..."

Subaru wasn't sure how to respond to this. "Well... just try to stay calm. I'm going to make sure you feel better soon. Hey, are you hungry?"

"Famished!" Emilia giggled.

"Well, I just made some food," Subaru handed her a bowl and a spoon. "Aren't I a great guy? I even brought you dinner in bed!" Subaru said cheerfully.

"You're an *amazing* guy," Emilia said seriously.

Subaru blushed and coughed.

"Subaru, where are we?"

"Oh. Good news, Mili. We're homeowners," Subaru said, sipping his soup.

"What?"

"I bought a house," Subaru said laconically.

Emilia's jaw dropped. "You bought a *house*?!"

"Yeah. See, I needed to make some medicine for you to treat the curse so I found a poor alchemist and I bought his lab and his home from him. We should be safe here for a while. We'll build up a supply of medicine and then go looking for a healer who specializes in curses. Any ideas where we should look?"

Emilia thought about it then shook her head. "I have no idea, Subaru. I wonder if Puck and Beatrice would be our best chance."

The pair looked sadly at one another for a moment.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Well. Then that just adds more incentive for us to rescue them, doesn't it?" Subaru said boisterously.

Emilia looked somber for a long moment. "Subaru, what are we going to do about the fact that I can't walk?"

Subaru hesitated. "Well, we're going to cure your curse," Subaru said finally. "There's no reason to think that curing the curse won't also fix your magic and your legs."

Emilia looked skeptical.

"Those marks are running up and down your legs, Mili!" Subaru pointed out. "Don't tell me that's a coincidence!"

Emilia made a face. She did not look convinced.

"Come on, Mili," Subaru urged. "Your soup is getting cold."

She sighed. "Subaru, I don't think I'm very hungry anymore..."

Subaru poked her. "Hey! Eat something! You've barely eaten in two days!"

Emilia's expression was somber as she picked up her bowl and started to drink her soup.

Subaru kept a cheerful smile on his face but his thoughts were bleak. *Now what? Did the Vitae make Emilia any better? She's awake at least. And the marks look dry. But her legs still aren't working. I knew that the Vitae couldn't cure her but at least it seems to have hit the pause button on the damage. But how long will that last?*

Later, after Subaru had done the dishes and carried Emilia to the bathroom to freshen up, the pair got ready for bed.

Emilia watched patiently while Subaru got undressed. "Ready for bed, Subaru?" Emilia asked.

Subaru sighed. "Well, first thing's first... Mili, while we have a minute," Subaru whispered, sitting down on the bed beside her. "I... I wanted to talk to you about that fight we had the other day. When I... stormed out of the cottage..."

Emilia looked at him, stricken and then she burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Subaru! I never meant for any of this to happen! I'm so, so sorry!" She blubbered.

Subaru blinked in shock and quickly threw his arms around her. "No! *I'm* sorry! I... I never should have yelled at you like that," He sighed.

Subaru felt Emilia calming down in his arms. "I was angry and scared and I took it out on you. I'm really sorry. I never want to do that ever again."

Emilia took a ragged breath. "Subaru, what do we do now? I can't move."

"*You're* going to focus on getting better," Subaru said with a smile. "That's *all* I want you to be thinking about. You're going to rest up and we'll find a doctor who can lift your curse. Then we'll rescue the spirits and disappear into the forest. Do me a favor and start thinking about how to word a mocking letter that we can leave behind before we vanish permanently that will tell everyone who screwed with us to piss off!"

Emilia didn't smile.

Subaru chuckled and forced a smile. "Don't worry, Mili," He whispered, holding her tight. "I already have a plan," He lied. "Everything is going to be fine. I promise."

Emilia murmured. "But Subaru, what are we-"

"Don't worry about it," Subaru soothed her firmly. "I don't want you to worry about anything except feeling better. And once you are, we're going to rescue Puck and Beatrice and start our family. As long as we're together, we can do anything."

Emilia sighed. "No, Subaru. *You* can do anything. I'm just along for the ride..."

Subaru shook his head. "Mili," he whispered. "Your legs are going-"

"I'm not talking about my legs, Subaru," Emilia said with quiet dignity. "This is just making... more obvious what should have been apparent a long time ago. All this time,

I've tried to prove that I can be more than a helpless little girl..."

Subaru winced at the hard words Emilia used to describe herself. "Mili, you never have to prove anything to me," He promised.

Emilia gave him a sad smile. "I wanted to prove it to myself, Subaru," She whispered. "I wanted to prove that... I don't know. That I could be more than I am..."

Subaru kissed her gently. "You *don't* have to be anything more than you, Mili," He murmured. "What you are is *wonderful*. I wouldn't change a thing about you. You are love of my life..."

Emilia gave a deep sigh and Subaru felt a great deal of tension drain out of her body. "I am, aren't I?" She whispered with a smile.

Subaru chuckled. "Yes. Yes, you are."

Emilia giggled. "Then that's plenty! That's all that I need and more than I could ever deserve! Why did I ever think that I needed more than that?"

Subaru held her close. "Whatever you want, whatever you need, I'll make sure that you get it," He promised.

Emilia snuggled against him for a moment. "Subaru, it's really late. Get into bed," She murmured.

"Good idea," Subaru said with a yawn. He slid into bed, wrapping his arms around Emilia. "Um. Does it hurt when I touch your legs?" He worried.

Emilia chuckled. "I can barely feel them, Subaru," She murmured.

"Oh. Right," Subaru said, sounding off-put.

"Go to sleep, Subaru," She whispered, stroking his face. "You've had a very long day."

Subaru tried to respond but he was interrupted by another yawn. Finally, Subaru nodded and snuggled close to Emilia. He was asleep as soon as his eyes closed.

Emilia gently stroked his hair. *Subaru is right. Since I left the capitol, I've been struggling to prove that I can be a hero, to prove that I can stand beside Subaru as an equal. But ever since I started this, all that I've managed to do is ruin people's lives and make everything harder for everyone.*

I once told Subaru that a wife needs to be something more than a pet but... maybe 'Emilia' can't be anything more than a pet.

It's time to accept reality. If Subaru is willing to accept me as I am then... I should just be grateful and stop trying to prove that I'm something I'm not.

Subaru will take care of me. And I'm going to do my best to take care of Subaru. I'll probably make a mess of things as usual but Subaru will forgive me for my mistakes. He always does.

What else do I need? We'll have a happy life together. Surely a happy life is enough for anybody.

Emilia laid down with a smile. She kissed Subaru goodnight and as she closed her eyes beside him, she felt an overwhelming weight fall from her shoulders, a weight of invisible expectations and demands that she had never truly wanted.

I never imagined how freeing simply 'giving up' could be...

Only in the darkest depths of her mind did Emilia wonder why the idea of finally giving up on herself should feel so very much like dying.

Crusch Karnstein stood before the sages' council in a private, closed session. She was dressed in her uniform and stood ramrod straight, trying to convince the sages of the seriousness of her report.

So far, this had proved difficult.

"Lady Crusch," Dore began with a sigh. "Do you truly expect us to believe that the Witch of Envy is free and roaming the world again? And that she has made an alliance with Subaru Natsuki?" Dore's skepticism was palpable.

Crusch took a deep breath. "Your excellencies, we know that this person was freed from a place referred to as 'the Witch's Tomb' in the Sanctuary. My officers and Subaru Natsuki's own faction can both attest to the powerful and dangerous magic that she possesses. She even managed to escape from Reinhard van Astrea! I would respectfully argue that assuming she is a threat to the Kingdom until we discover evidence to the contrary is wise and prudent."

The sages seemed to mull that over.

"That might make sense," Byrd admitted. "But what are you suggesting that we do about it?"

"We must immediately devote all of our efforts to locating Subaru Natsuki and ascertaining what is really going on," Crusch replied. "We can not make any kind of effective strategy for a situation that we do not understand. Whether Subaru Natsuki is a willing conspirator of the witch or a helpless captive, we must understand what the situation really is as soon as possible in order to take whatever steps are necessary to protect the kingdom."

"Aren't we already doing that?" Aghart said in a bored voice.

"I'm suggesting we allocate more resources in the search," Crusch urged.

"To my mind, we've already allocated more than ample resources to find this... person," Aghart's lip curled. "A man who can so easily get lost in the forest is no true king."

"Got lost?! This is a man who was fighting the Witch Cult to protect innocent people and was likely forced to flee into the wilderness in fear for his life!" Choi reminded him.

Aghart waved the distinction away. "Precisely my point. Subaru Natsuki is almost certainly dead, killed in retaliation by these monsters which he fought. A heroic death by all accounts," He admitted dismissively.

"You believe that he's dead?," Byrd asked. "Even if that's so, shouldn't endeavor to recover his body?"

We couldn't be that lucky, Crusch mentally agreed. And even if he is dead, that just means that no one is left to hold the witch's leash...

"And what should we do about that?" Aghart asked, throwing his hands in the air. "Will we pour the wealth and manpower of the kingdom into hunting through the forest looking for the mossy bones of an untitled foreigner of no known family? If we even *found* his bones, whom would we give them to?"

"It's only been a few days since Subaru Natsuki disappeared," Choi said critically. "It's premature to simply assume that he's dead. Do you really think the Witch Cult killed him?"

Aghart shrugged. "I believe that... *somebody* killed him. His speeches about demi-human rights and starving peasants have irritated a number of people across the kingdom. He was a royal candidate, lost and alone in the woods, tired and vulnerable.

Certainly this was a target that someone with vision and boldness might have taken advantage of," His gaze flickered across Crusch.

Crusch started, realizing what Aghart was thinking.

Aghart shook his head. "Besides, with Subaru Natsuki gone, perhaps the royal selection can focus on... more worthy candidates now. Ones who reflect the pride and dignity of the Lagunican throne and who don't associate with riffraff. I move that we call off the search," He declared.

"No!" Dore and Byrd said together.

Dore, Byrd, Choi, and Aghart all began to argue at the same time.

"Calling off the search is premature at this time," McMahon declared, silencing the others. "The search shall continue for now. However, we deny any new resources be allocated. You already have an army, Lady Crusch. Tell your officers to do their jobs. If they're incompetent, find new officers."

Crusch bristled at this disrespect directed to her men.

"Are there any objections?" McMahon looked right and left.

The other sages said nothing.

"Then we are adjourned," McMahon gaveled.

The sages all walked out of the room without a backward glance, leaving Crusch alone and frustrated.

Emilia was exhausted after struggling with a fever and the curse so the next morning she was ready to sleep in.

Subaru would have cheerfully done the same thing but he had too much to do. He forced himself to wake up and stretch.

Subaru tried to creep out of bed as quietly as he could.

"Subaru?" Emilia murmured, stirred by his movements.

"Sorry, Mili," Subaru whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep."

Emilia struggled to sit up in bed using just her arms and Subaru assisted her. "It's fine, Subaru. I think that it's time that I woke up."

Subaru sighed. "Well, I need to go and make some more medicine before we head back to the forest. But I'll make breakfast first," Subaru said. "Anything in particular you'd like to eat?"

"Really? What can I have?" Emilia asked in surprise.

"Vegetable soup," Subaru said cheerfully.

Emilia started to smile and shook her head ruefully. "Wow, Subaru. How did you know that was exactly what I wanted?" She teased.

"Just lucky I guess," Subaru laughed. He climbed out of bed and pulled his robe on.

Subaru briefly checked the lab and discovered that a new jar of *Umbra* was ready for processing.

I don't have any more life-force to spin into Vitae but at least the Umbra is ready. And with our luck, we're never too far off from getting into a fight.

Then he went into the kitchen and started to heat up the leftover vegetable soup from last night.

He brought the food back up to Emilia and they ate it together.

After finishing breakfast, Subaru closely inspected the black marks up and down Emilia's stomach and legs. They all appeared to be dry again and no longer bleeding or spreading.

OK. So, so far so good.

"Mili," Subaru said. "I'm going to go see about making some more medicine before we leave here. You try to get some sleep, OK?"

"It's still morning, Subaru," Emilia complained. "I'm not tired-" Her voice cut off in a yawn.

Subaru smirked.

Emilia pouted. "It's just a coincidence, Subaru."

Subaru bent over and kissed her. "I know," He said indulgently. "I won't be gone too long. Try and rest up. We'll be heading back to the forest today or tomorrow."

Emilia nodded with another yawn. "OK, Subaru," She murmured, sounding on the edge of sleep.

Subaru slipped out of the room with a smile.

Subaru sat in the lab, preparing to cook more *Umbra*.

Maybe we could live here? Subaru mused. It's certainly bigger than Mili's cottage. There's plenty of room for us and the spirits. Even a baby or two someday...

Then again, I feel like staying this close to Stoneybrooke is just begging for trouble. People are going to panic if they ever catch sight of Emilia. I can't just imprison her in the house. Not to mention our kids might look elven as well.

I was stupid to head to Gusteko in the first place. It was the closest border but it didn't solve any of our problems other than the immediate threat of Reinhard and Crusch coming after us. Emilia told me that Gusteko was a racist country but I never imagined how virulent that racism would actually be!

No. Gusteko isn't a workable option for us. We need to heal Emilia, find the spirits and then head to either Kararagi or Vollachia.

Kararagi is probably the best option but I think that they're fairly broad-minded in Vollachia too. They don't mind demi-humans as long as they're strong. Emilia certainly qualifies. Or she will once the curse's seal on her magic comes off.

Granted, I doubt we'd like living in Vollachia. It's too violent and confrontational but at least the weather would be nice. Maybe we could find a little house way out in the middle of nowhere...

Subaru looked over the lab for a moment, ruminating on the available equipment.

So for right now, I need to focus on how I'm going to heal Emilia. We can go try to find a healer but I don't even know where to start. We can't just go running around in circles trusting to luck. We tried that after the Sanctuary and that cost us the spirits...

A way of despair swept over Subaru and he violently shook his head.

Well, I could start by heading to a nearby city and talking to healers. Maybe one of them can help me or at least provide a bit of direction.

If the healers can't help... Well, Daphne gave me recipes for every potion under the sun including hundreds that specifically cure curses. So why can't I just cure Emilia myself?

Azoth would certainly dispel the curse. But I can't make that without the Philosopher's Stone.

Daphne says that her Philosopher's Stone is probably still out there somewhere but I doubt she knows that for sure. And even if it is still out there, that doesn't mean that I can find it. If it's out there, likely as not, the Witch Cult has it.

So if I can't find the Stone, I'd have to try to make one but that's also a nonstarter. Even assuming that I did everything right the first time, I'd be spending months at the very least preparing the Stone. And I'd need Regulus's help to do it!

Subaru had a sudden mental image of himself meeting Regulus in a coffee shop to ask for a favor.

OK. So that's not going to fly. What else can I do?

With Daphne's memories, I can make lots of curse-curing potions. It's possible one might do the job but they're not like Azoth. Azoth works on anything. It breaks any magic down into its base components. But most curse-curing potions are extremely specific. That means I can't brew the right one until I identify what the curse afflicting Emilia is.

The other problem is that most of those potions are extremely complicated. And that's a problem. I'm not sure if a chemistry lab like Daphne's has existed in centuries. The equipment needed to brew some of these potions properly would be very expensive since I need to control pressure, temperature, and create vacuums to avoid contaminating the reactants.

And don't even get me started on how hard making a Philosopher's Stone for Anima would be.

What's worse is, I can't be certain that the equipment I need still even exists. Does anyone do chemistry on the level of Daphne anymore? Nicholas's lab looks like a child's chemistry set compared to Daphne's workshop.

The equipment I need might not be available anywhere. I can create the designs using Reason and Judgment but those would all be custom orders.

And God knows how much that will cost.

Subaru grabbed his money pouch and for the first time since he came to this world, he wished that it was larger.

While Emilia slept and a new batch of *Umbra* brewed, Subaru spent much of the morning going through Nicholas's supply closets with a fine-toothed comb.

This guy was not organized! I found some supplies that were probably lying in his closet and unopened for years.

On the bright side, I did find the address of Nicholas's chemical supply company. They can help me, assuming that they're still in business. A lot of these packages are kind of old.

It looks like they're located in Kocytos and even if the company is out of business, it's a decent place to start looking for a supplier. Ganaks is a good idea too. It's a huge city with a big commercial area from what I've heard.

It seems like my best bet right now is to go to a major city, see if I can find a healer, and investigate the current 'state of the art' for alchemy to see what resources I have to work with.

I don't know how much healing Emilia is going to cost. Can a healer dispel a curse in one visit or are we committing to months of treatment?

Making more money might become a serious concern. And longterm treatment plans would pin us down in unfriendly territory for the foreseeable future. That could make it hard to hide...

The day flew by. Emilia slept through most of it with Subaru only waking her up for lunch and carrying her to the bathroom a few times.

Subaru took hours to go through all of Nicholas's disorganized supplies, taking inventory and labeling a variety of compounds.

Subaru had brought up soup for them to eat in Emilia's bedroom together. But first he had carried her to the bathroom and back.

"After we finish dinner, maybe you should try to get some sleep," Subaru suggested, laying her down in bed again. "I know being stuck in bed is boring but you are still recovering from a serious-"

"Subaru," Emilia interrupted intently, "What's that?" She pointed at his stomach.

Subaru looked down at his shirt and saw that it was speckled with drops of watery blood.

Subaru pulled the blankets back and saw that Emilia's cursed-wounds that resembled strange letters were bleeding and leaking black pus again.

One day! Subaru thought in shock. This curse burned through a full year of life-force in one day?! This curse could eradicate whole cities!

Emilia swallowed hard. "So the medicine didn't work?"

"It worked *fine*," Subaru said firmly. "The marks haven't spread and they stopped bleeding for almost twenty four hours. We just need to give you another dose. You sit here and finish your soup-"

"I *have* to sit here, Subaru," Emilia said bitterly. "I can't get out of this bed!"

Subaru took a deep breath. "I'll be back as soon as I can with more medicine, OK?"

"Back?" Emilia echoed. "Where are you going?"

"I need to go... out. I'm missing an ingredient for the medicine and I need to go grab it."

"Will stores be open?" Emilia asked dubiously. "It's almost sunset and Stoneybrooke is dangerous for us right now."

Subaru hesitated. "I think I know a place I can pick it up without going to Stoneybrooke. Will you be OK here for an hour or two?"

Emilia looked at him, her face awash with frustration, anger, and fear. Finally, she nodded once.

Davi was a merchant. Actually, merchant was being generous. Davi was a peddler. He walked between Ganaks, Iruk, Stoneybrooke, and Sanshi carrying bags of small valuables for sale and trade. He was heading for Stoneybrooke along the King's highway, planning to spend the night there before continuing on to Ganaks. He had just spend a few days with his family at the homestead they shared with his brother's family near Iruk. His bags were empty as he started his route again and he walked quickly.

Just after sunset, Davi saw a man on a black riding dragon coming through the forest road toward him.

The young man was clearly looking at Davi and the peddler found himself stiffening under the intensity of that gaze. He reached into his pocket to grip the handle of the long knife he carried for emergencies.

"Excuse me," The young man said, dismounting. "I wonder if you would help me with something."

"Let's not beat around the bush," Davi said in a clipped tone. "I've got no gold and I don't have anything valuable right now."

Davi's bags were indeed empty and his gold coins were cunning sewn into special pockets in his bags that were nearly impossible to find. Davi was certain that the highwayman would inspect his bags and then head off.

"You misunderstand me," The young man said in dolorous tones.

Davi only had enough time to frown in confusion before the young man seized Davi by the throat. Davi desperately drew his knife and stabbed the young man in the eye but the blade snapped and went flying as if he'd tried to stab a boulder. The shock of the impact traveled up his arm and Davi dropped the now useless knife.

Davi's hands clutched at the grip around his throat but his fingers felt weak and feeble and they could only flutter at the boy's hands like spider-legs.

Davi shook his head violently as the world dimmed around him.

Why?! Why is he doing this?! I have nothing to rob! Nothing worth killing for. He has no idea if I have any money or not! Why is he killing me?!

"For what it's worth," The young man said somberly. "I really am sorry about this..."

Davi's eyes rolled back in his head. He faintly heard a soft crack before the world went dark.

The young man sighed at the dead body in his hands. "But that isn't really worth anything, is it..."

Subaru dragged the dead body off the road and hid it deep in the bushes where it would be unlikely that anyone would notice it.

Subaru hesitated a moment and then mentally sighed and began to go through the merchant's large backpack, looking for anything useful to steal. *In for a penny, in for a pound...*

The bag was basically empty although he did find a few gold coins hidden inside.

He also found a child's drawing. Three small children beside a man and woman.

Subaru took it for granted that he had just crushed the neck of 'Daddy.'

Subaru took a deep breath. *Your focus needs to be on Emilia, A cold voice whispered to him. Nothing else matters. Nothing else can be allowed to matter. You know full well what kind of people live in Gusteko. You saw it demonstrated yesterday. If they hadn't*

been so vile then Emilia might have gotten medical treatment and two men might still be alive. The locals here are filth. They're pigs. They're not even people, they are a resource. And as a resource, there is no higher calling than to be expended to preserve Emilia...

Subaru raced back to his lab. Luckily he had plenty of *Umbra* already prepared.

Alright. Just need to refine this with a little sal-ammoniac and add the years I stole from that... trader tonight.

But this is a huge problem. Emilia burned through an entire year of stolen life in a single day! Daphne's memories tell me that I won't get more than a year or two of life from a person without the Stone. Emilia needing a year every single day isn't tenable! I need to find a solution!

Subaru gathered up the *Vitae* once the clouds of poison gas had cleared and measured it carefully.

It's about two years...

And that means two days until the curse reactivates again... How much more punishment can Emilia's body take until it just...

Subaru walked back upstairs with a tiny vial of blue liquid in hand.

"Alright, Mili," Subaru said cheerfully. "Time for your medicine!"

Emilia still looked frightened. "Subaru," Emilia whispered. "What if the medicine isn't working?"

Subaru forced an amused look onto his face. "So, the lack of symptoms that you had all night was just a coincidence then?" He joked. He gently tousled her hair. "The medicine works fine, Mili. We just need to get the dosage locked down."

He handed the *Vitae* to Emilia.

Emilia looked dubiously at the faintly glowing liquid but she obediently drank it.

Her eyes brightened. "Subaru, this tastes delicious!" She chirped. Emilia leaned back against the pillow, her eyes dreamy. "This medicine feels wonderful..."

"Hey!" Subaru mock-scolded her. "No pretending to stay sick just so you can enjoy the medicine, OK?!"

Emilia giggled. "OK, Subaru."

Subaru lifted the blanket and looked at Emilia's legs. The wounds had already dried up.

"Subaru, where did you go tonight?" Emilia asked in a dreamy voice.

Subaru hesitated. "I didn't go far. I got lucky. I found a peddler on the road. He... had what I needed..."

The next morning, Subaru sprang into action, knowing that he was on the clock.

Subaru woke Emilia up for an early lunch and then carried her to the bathroom to freshen up.

When he'd brought her back to the bed he broached a subject. "Emilia, do you think you'll be OK here for a few hours?"

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"I want to run over to Kocytos," Subaru said. "It'll give me a chance to buy some supplies and look for a doctor who can treat curses."

Emilia frowned. "Will a doctor from Kocytos be willing to come all this way, Subaru?" Emilia asked.

Subaru shrugged. "If we pay him enough, probably. Or we'll bring you there. Even if the doctor can't treat you personally, they might have some suggestions for how to treat the curse."

Emilia took a moment to absorb that. "How long will you be gone?"

Subaru rocked his hand back and forth. "I'm not sure. I'm hoping to be back early this afternoon but I've never been to Kocytos before and the road might be rougher than I think."

Emilia took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll be alright, Subaru," She said firmly. "I don't want to chain you to my bedside. I'll be just fine while you're gone."

Subaru nodded. "I know you will," He murmured. "But I'll make sure to leave you something to drink and some food to eat before I go, just in case I'm late getting back."

Subaru flew into a flurry of activity. He had placed a pitcher full of ice water on the night-table just in case she got thirsty and then left a bowl of raisins beside it for her to snack on.

He found several blankets and left them folded on the bed if it got cold and left some painkillers nearby in case she got a headache.

Finally, Subaru flew up the stairs and brought a book to the exasperated Emilia.

"Subaru," She said with an edge in her voice. "What are you doing?"

Subaru chuckled ruefully. "I wanted to find you something to read. I tore the whole house apart and this looks like the *one* book in the place that isn't a chemistry textbook of some kind."

Emilia took the book. "*Sophia and the Ruby Princess*," She read.

"Yeah. Is there anything else you think you might need? Should I try to go find some more pillows? Or maybe-"

"Subaru! Go!" Emilia snapped. "I'll be just fine for a few hours. Go and do what you need to do or you won't get back before it gets dark. It gets cold in Gusteko at night."

Subaru looked awkward but said, "I'll be back as quick as I can." He kissed her gently and left the room, heading down the stairs.

Emilia lay there until she heard him leave and lock the door.

Emilia looked down at her useless legs with the sort of glare reserved for the worst of traitors. "This is all *your* fault," She hissed at her own limbs.

Subaru reached Kocytos late that afternoon.

Subaru didn't have a map to Kocytos and was limited to following the road signs. He made several wrong turns and needed to deduce where the city was located. This meant that the trip took much longer than he had anticipated.

Kocytos was a large city, situated on the plains in central Sanshi. The field outside of the city was bustling with activity. It looked like a festival was being set up just outside the town. Stalls with games and food were being assembled everywhere and a simple wooden crane was being used to build an enormous pile of wood for a bonfire.

Subaru rode Patrasche around the festival grounds and into the city.

Sanshi was much smaller than the Lagunican capitol but it was still a good-sized city for this world. The buildings were mostly made of stone and they had a thick, squat look about them as if the buildings were grimly determined to endure the worst that the winter could throw at them.

Subaru rode Patrasche down the main streets and went searching for an alchemist or a pharmacy that he could question about supplies as well as keeping his eyes open for doctors.

As the sun set, Subaru rode out of Kocytos with a disgruntled expression on his face.

I can't escape the feeling that all I did today was waste my own time. I bought some useful ingredients that could let me cook a variety of curse-curing potions but that's pointless until I know what curse I'm dealing with.

God, I never meant to be away for so long! I haven't seen Emilia since before lunch!

And the doctors were even worse. I spoke to four different 'medical experts' about lifting curses and they all got extremely evasive. No one claimed that they could actually heal Emilia just that they might be able to mitigate the symptoms. Worse, none of their diagnosis and treatments agreed with each other which makes me wonder if they were all just stringing me along anyway.

And each Doctor demanded gold before they'd even talk to me! It's ridiculous! I'm going to need to find a new way to make money soon.

Subaru rode past the festival where a large crowd was gathered. There were huge stalls everywhere, selling all manner of toys, gifts, and food. Subaru also noticed that a number of farmers had made the trip to the festival to sell their wares.

Food. That's something I didn't even think of trying to purchase but we really need it. I'm already here so I might as well go shopping. It would be nice if I could find a way to prevent this trip from being a complete waste of time.

Maybe I could even find a new book or a toy or something for Emilia to use while she's stuck in bed. She must be going out of her mind with boredom...

This convinced Subaru to hide Patrasche in the woods nearby. He pulled his hood up and walked down the hill to join the festival.

The festival was centered around a huge as-yet-unlit bonfire. The bonfire was situated in a large empty clearing in the center of the fair, empty except for a large wooden crane nearby that had helped build the pile of wood for the bonfire. The fair had dozens if not hundreds of stalls offering games and refreshments. The area was lit by a staggering number of burning torches.

This place feels just like a carnival back home.

Subaru quickly bought several bags of vegetables and some slices of meat. After debating for a moment, he took the bags back to Patrasche and slipped them into her saddlebags to free up his hands.

Then he went back to the fair and tried to roam around, looking for games, books, puzzles, or anything else that might serve to entertain a poor woman stuck in bed.

The crowd was noisy and enormous and it took Subaru close to an hour of constant frustration to find what had to be the only book stall in the fair.

What was I expecting? Subaru sighed to himself. *Most of this world is illiterate! Did I really expect to find a bookstore on every block?*

The books were all old and secondhand but they were legible. The stall was run by a kindly old man.

These books are cheap. Probably unreasonably so, despite being secondhand. I'm guessing that the man is doing this as a sort of charitable act, trying to make sure that poor people have something to read.

Subaru rummaged through the shop and grabbed four books almost at random, only confirming that they were stories and not treatises on some obscure subject.

I know this sounds bad but I don't have the slightest idea what Emilia likes to read. I don't think most people in this world read for pleasure at all and those who do are certainly the nobility. Everything that Emilia and I have read since we met was for the purpose of studying for the royal selection.

Subaru noticed some 'puzzle games' on one of the shelves and studied them.

It'd be nice to give Mili something that would keep her hands and mind busy too. But I'm not sure if any of these would work.

He looked the stall over and became aware of a loud conversation at the next stall.

"I'm just saying, Captain, I don't think that it's fair," An older man in plain armor joked good-naturedly.

The captain was wearing more ornate, polished armor. "I agree it's not fair, Sergeant. But as an officer, they give me the dirty jobs!" He snorted sarcastically. "I'd *much* rather spend the evening drinking with all you jackasses. Instead, I'm forced to spend the night with Count Morgen," He rolled his eyes.

The soldiers chuckled. "Well, hey. We'll be drinking cheap beer and you get the real hooch," The sergeant pointed out and the men all laughed.

The captain snorted. "Ugh. And I'll be trying to *get* drunk as fast as humanly possible," The Captain mourned. "Count Morgen is just the fucking worst. Do you know that he insists on regaling me with the story of his heroic bravery at the Battle of Tannath *every* single time I see him?"

"Battle of Tannath, sir?" One of the other soldiers muttered. "I don't think I've ever heard of it."

"Because there's no such thing!" The Captain snorted. "Morgen's just dressing up a minor skirmish involving a few bandits so that he sounds like a real soldier instead of a noble who came along on a few patrols to further his political career!"

The soldiers all grumbled about that.

"So in four days we're going to be at the Great Hall and you're with Count Please-Be-Impressed-By-Me," The sergeant said. The other soldiers chuckled. "When do we march on Siros anyway, Captain?"

"Soon," The captain replied. "I haven't gotten exact instructions from the general yet but it'll be soon. An army burns gold like you wouldn't believe. The Prince won't let us just camp out here for much longer."

"Uh, Sarge?" One the soldiers raised his hand. "Can I ask a question?"

"I thought that I'd trained you out of that bad habit, boy," The older man sighed with a weary chuckle. "Asking questions in this job has a funny way of getting you answers. And you won't like any of them."

The soldier made a face. "Sarge, I just don't get it. I mean, I know I'm just a soldier and that I don't need to understand-"

"And don't you *ever* forget that, son," The sergeant deadpanned. The other soldiers laughed.

The soldier flushed but continued talking. "Thing is, Sarge, I just don't get this! What are we doing? Rumor has it that Siros is under siege and we already have twice their number there. When we arrive, it'll probably be three times their number. But what's the point? I mean, no sense in attacking a fortified city when you can just starve it out, right? It's not like winter's nipping at our heels. Why are we marching at all? I just don't get the Prince's plan!"

The sergeant and the captain shared a long look. "We don't get it either," The captain admitted quietly. "The Prince's orders have been strange lately."

"Can I help you find anything, sir?" Subaru jumped as the stall-keeper walked up behind him and addressed him in a friendly voice.

"No," Subaru replied. "Just browsing. Thanks."

The old man nodded with a smile. "Take your time. A good book is like a love affair."

"Uh, thanks," Subaru replied.

Subaru tried to catch up with the soldiers' conversation. He found himself listening closely. After the week of fleeing from Crusch's army, Subaru had a paranoia about military campaigns nearby. "-Just been crazy!" The captain finished.

"Keep your voice down, Captain!" The old sergeant warned him. "But yeah. I feel the same way. I'd have said that during this war, the Prince's orders have been mad as a march-hare but we won every single fight and we won them easily. He ordered us to advance right into the teeth of their spears and he ordered us to fall back when there was no reason to. But every time, we later found out that we attacked at just the right time before their reinforcements showed up or got out of what we thought was safe territory right before an ambush was sprung."

"Must be spies," The captain mused. "The Prince must be basing his instructions on some kind of secret intelligence."

"Knowledge is everything in war," The sergeant agreed sagely. "I thought this campaign was going to be bloody and grinding. Now it looks like we'll all be home before the snow flies!"

"Works for me," The captain murmured. "I'd like to spend some time with my kid for a change before he's all grown-up."

The sergeant nodded. "I'd like to spend some time with little Suzy myself. My granddaughter just turned four. She's cute as-"

Sensing that the conversation had shifted, Subaru shook it off. He bought the books he was carrying and shoved them into an over-sized robe pocket where they bulged out comically.

Subaru started heading back to Patrasche.

OK, so the Sanshi military is busy on some kind of campaign. I guess that's good to know although I'm not sure if there's any way I can spin that to our advantage. Except maybe to keep clear of 'Siros.'

The festival crowd started to cheer.

Subaru stopped short. He looked through the crowd and saw that a group of men in robes were approaching. They were carrying something on their shoulders.

Subaru began to move his way through the crowd to get a better look. *Careful. Those robes make them look like mages.*

Subaru finally reached the front of the crowd and saw that the mages were being led by a man in noble-attire who wore thick glasses. He had dark hair and a smug, superior expression. The group were all carrying a scarecrow-like effigy that was wearing a black dress on their shoulders.

Subaru frowned, wondering what was going on.

The men gathered at the crane and began to tie the dummy to a strand of rope. Then they began to pull a wheel and the dummy was hoisted into the air high above the bonfire. A few men began to douse the woodpile with what looked like lantern oil.

The nobleman turned to face the crowd with an exalted grin. "Praise the righteous for their clarity!" He shouted.

The crowd shrieked out in glee.

"Today we honor our forefathers who saved Gusteko from the evil witch and the Witch Hunters who bravely continue to root out and capture evil witches even to this day!"

Subaru blinked and then his face twisted in disgust. *There are no more witches! I mean OK, Daphne told me that she's not dead but she is locked up... somewhere, somehow...*

Look, the point is that all the witches are either dead or locked up. There's no way that these 'Witch Hunters' have found any actual witches in centuries! I don't even believe that they're tracking down Witch Cultists. How many people in this world could take on Regulus and win? Or Capella? Or even Lye?!

They're probably just putting innocent people on trial because the locals dislike them or worse, they're doing it for their own amusement!

The noble was talking again. "Tonight we feast to celebrate a new day in Gusteko! The time is coming for the heretical blasphemers of Siros!"

The crowd booed loudly at the mention of Siros.

What's Siros and why do these people hate it so much? Subaru stood there with a morose expression, wondering why he'd ever bothered to come to this festering cesspool of a country.

"Soon our soldiers will burn Siros to the ground! No root nor branch will escape this cleansing!"

The crowd cheered.

Subaru looked around in disbelief. *Wait a minute! Did any of you even hear what he just said?! He's saying that they're going to kill everybody! How are any of you OK with that? You might dislike the people of Siros. You might even hate them. But what the hell makes you happy to hear about them dying? This isn't just killing soldiers this is killing women and children and other innocent people! What the hell is wrong with you people?!*

"Tonight," The noble shouted. "We celebrate our impending victory! Tonight we celebrate our victories of long ago! Tonight, we burn the witch!"

"Burn her!" The crowd screamed, laughing and cheering.

Subaru blinked and looked up at the dummy that dangled from the crane's rope with a horrified, new understanding.

The nobleman took a torch in hand and flung it onto the bonfire.

It immediately burst into flames.

The crowd cheered.

Subaru looked up the effigy dangling high overhead. He expected that it would have been lowered onto the bonfire but instead it was suspended some forty feet above it.

"Confess!" The noble shouted.

"Confess!" The crowd cheered.

The crane's rope was released to unwind freely. The effigy crashed on top of the burning pile of wood. It quickly caught fire and the crowd went wild.

Subaru assumed that this was over but the crane quickly picked the effigy up off the flames. The effigy still burned but sullenly.

It's not a scarecrow. It's made out of some kind of flame-retardant material. But why bother doing that?

"Confess!" The noble demanded.

"Confess!" The crowd cheered.

The crane dropped the effigy onto the bonfire again.

Subaru's jaw went slack. *This isn't even celebrating an execution, this is celebrating torture! These people would actually keep lowering a person into fire until they confessed to some crime!*

This is sick! This isn't like throwing an effigy of a monster onto the fire back home. Monsters don't exist back home! But witches are real here and you enormous bastards are celebrating one being slowly burned alive!

No matter what the Witch of Envy might have done, witches are still real people. They can't all be evil. Are the witch's actions even up for consideration here? I haven't heard what she did wrong yet. We're celebrating her execution but was there even a trial back in the day?

Look at Daphne. I mean, the girl was an absolute freak. Maybe the strangest person that I've ever met in my life. But what did she do that made her deserve death?

I mean, yeah she killed Jenevieve but that was by Jenevieve's request. Jenevieve spent a full ten years of her life getting ready for it. And yeah, maybe Daphne shouldn't have been allowed to do that to her but still, it's hard to call it 'murder.'

The crowd was cheering in a frenzy and the effigy was being lifted up and brought crashing down onto the bonfire over and over again.

Subaru felt sick. The joyous, bestial frenzy on the people's faces filled him with disgust.

These people are scum...

Morbid curiosity caused him to slowly step out of the crowd. He walked closer to the bonfire, seeking a better look at the dummy.

The heat of the flames were overwhelming at this distance.

The effigy hit the bonfire again and this time its head snapped clean off and rolled off the bonfire.

The crowd went wild.

The head landed at Subaru's feet and kept rolling. He instinctively put his foot out and stopped it as if it were a soccer ball.

Subaru slowly took his foot off the effigy's face. The witch was clearly intended to be grotesque, resembling a goblin. It had a long nose, huge pointy ears and slanted eyes.

The blood drained from Subaru's face as he suddenly realized that it was an elf. This effigy was a racial caricature of what the people of Gusteko thought elves looked like.

The world stopped as Subaru noticed that the effigy had silver hair. It was nearly all burned black now but as he watched, a few strands of silver fell onto the ground.

The world spun around Subaru. He saw the towering flames in front of him and for a moment, he saw these flames engulfing the Stoneybrooke inn while he watched helplessly. He could almost hear Emilia's screaming as she withered in the heat.

He closed his eyes and held his breath but the sound of the screaming just wouldn't stop. It was all too much. The loss of the spirits, the Black Water nearly eating Emilia, Emilia encountering Elsa, and then her unknown sickness.

The people at the inn screaming about how Subaru and Emilia both needed to die just for the crime of existing and wanting to be together. Now he saw firsthand what sort of fate Emilia could expect if she was ever unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the people of Gusteko.

It's too much... Subaru whispered.

Subaru's Authority awoke deep inside of him. It surged through him and swallowed him whole.

Subaru stared unblinking into the roaring fire. The heat was barely noticeable now.

"Endless Hunger," Subaru whispered.

As the bonfire burned that night, Robert an Griest sat in a chair in the field surrounded by the mages who served as his personal guard. They were keeping the smelly riff-raff at a comfortable distance from their lord.

Robert only used mages as guards. He'd never had much respect for swordsmen, mostly because of several incidents while growing-up with his bully of a brother, Prince Malcolm. Robert had, at best, been an indifferent swordsman but he had grown up to be a highly capable mage. Robert's spellcraft had earned him the kind of respect that other men gained with their fists and blades.

Now Robert was the lord of Kocytos. He ignored his brother as much as possible and as a rule, Malcolm was surprisingly civilized enough or apathetic enough, to return the favor.

Robert hated these festivals. He had done his duty, riling the monkeys up for the bonfire and now he was just waiting for the fire to burn out so he could go home.

One of his guards glanced at him. "My lord," Theodore murmured. "I know that this has delayed your dinner. Would you like me to fetch you some food from one of the stalls?"

Robert looked at Theodore incredulously. "Thank you, Theodore," Robert said begrudgingly. "But I'd sooner put paint on my tongue than indulge in peasant cuisine. They only have one recipe: throw everything into the pot and boil until you can't recognize it anymore!"

Theodore chuckled.

Robert made a face. "Tell me, Theodore," Robert mused. "Do you recall what's for dinner tonight?"

Theodore thought about it. "I believe peacocks' tongue in honey sauce and pearls dissolved in vinegar."

Robert's face brightened. This was one of his favorite meals. Robert's cook cost him more than a few gold coins every year but the man was an artist and Robert had never been one to be tightfisted where the pleasure of his table was concerned.

Knowing the feast that awaited him upon returning home, Robert could watch the bonfire and the hundreds of assembled cheering monkeys with patience and even a bit of good humor.

Although, I do wish that flaming tower of lumber would burn out faster, Robert thought ruefully.

No sooner had Robert thought this than the bonfire went out.

It didn't sputter or dim, it went out like a candle that someone had pinched off.

The dozens of torches held by people in the crowd and the blazing torches set on poles around the festival winked out as well.

The crowd murmured in surprised confusion as they were plunged into darkness.

The crowd began to shiver. A warm spring night had suddenly developed the inexplicable chill of a Gusteko winter. A cold wind picked up and blew across the field.

"Theodore!" Robert snapped.

Theodore didn't need further direction. He raised his hands and concentrated. A moment later, a brilliant ball of fire, somewhat bigger than a grapefruit, appeared in his hands. The ball shed a warm, bright light over the immediate area and some of the peasants sighed in relief.

A peasants even tried to get closer to the fireball.

Robert frowned. He was about to order his guards to keep the peasants back when Theodore's fireball zipped out of his hands like a comet.

Robert turned to demand an explanation but he was silenced by the completely comical look of shock on Theodore's face. Theodore hadn't thrown that fireball, somehow his spell had taken independent action.

The ball of fire streaked across the field toward the snuffed bonfire. The brilliant light of the fireball revealed that a dark shadowy figure stood in front of the bonfire pile. The fireball should have illuminated him clearly but it did not. Instead the fire dimmed and darkened as it fell under the man's shadow.

The fireball crashed headlong into the black silhouette, smashing into his chest.

Robert knew from experience that a fire spell of this magnitude should have sent the person it struck flying if not engulf them in flames but instead the fireball vanished with nary a ripple, like a pebble tossed into a deep lake.

Robert felt his teeth chattering. It was getting cold. Unrealistically cold for a spring night.

"Fall in," Theodore snapped. The mages took up positions around their lord and Robert slowly rose from his chair. He mentally rehearsed his best spells in case they were needed.

A voice whispered across the field. "What is happening here?" The voice was inhuman, deep as a well and as cold as a winter night.

A chill wind blew across the field and the peasants shuddered. They quickly stumbled away from the now ice-cold bonfire, clustering together and murmuring anxiously.

Robert's eyes narrowed.

The stranger was moving. He was coming closer to him. And he brought his darkness with him.

Robert and the guards stood ready. *Maybe this is some kind of prank or just a weak mage with a real flair for drama. Maybe this is all that he's capable of.*

Maybe but I doubt it.

The strange man came closer and closer. Robert saw him as a pure black silhouette. His face was as featureless as an oil slick.

"You celebrate death?" The stranger asked calmly. "You celebrate the pain of others?"

Robert clenched his jaw. He considered a variety of responses to this impertinent question. He even considered being conciliatory but ultimately, Robert decided there was only one choice. The man had disrupted the Festival of the Witch's Pyre, the most important night of the year for these miserable people. If he was some prankster then he needed to be captured and punished. If the stranger was a clear and present danger to Robert, his guards, and the assembled peasants, then there was no way he'd be satisfied with polite words anyway.

"We celebrate the death of a witch," Robert said bluntly. "We celebrate the restoration of peace and order in Gusteko. Who are you and what business do you have here?"

The figure paused for a long moment as if considering his answer. "I am Taiyang... the Witch of the Frozen Wastes," He whispered.

Robert's eyes hardened. *Most of the people claiming to be witches or heirs to their knowledge and power are liars and frauds. A few hours in the torture chamber changes their tune. Of course, pretending to be a witch is a capital crime itself. If he's lying then I can kill this freak without any concern. If he's telling the truth then he's a lethal threat to the entire world and needs to be treated as such. Either way, he dies now.*

Robert took a single step forward. His guards fell in behind him. Robert noted their well-trained reactions with approval. "Only a fool would declare himself a witch in Sanshi! Much less to the Prince's brother!"

"Because you will throw me on the fire?" He murmured with no apparent concern. "Because you will cheer for my death and suffering?"

Robert clenched his jaw. "Whether you are a witch or a liar you are not welcome in Sanshi. Surrender immediately and I *may* decide to show mercy," Robert snapped.

"You are very kind to me," The monster said in a whisper that could be heard throughout the fairgrounds. "But I shall *not* be kind to you..."

Robert didn't hesitate. He stepped forward. "*Al Jiwald!*" He thundered, pointing at the fool. Power built up in his body and crackled like lightning as a beam of unimaginable heat and energy leaped from his hand to slam into Taiyang.

That will illuminate this fool to a good examination! Robert thought with glee. *If there's anything left of him to see!*

Al Jiwald was the apex of Yang magic. A searing blast of heat and light without equal. The spell was extremely costly to cast and normally lasted only ten seconds before

Robert simply couldn't sustain it any longer but that was long enough to reduce nearly anything to scraps and ashes.

The beam struck Taiyang square in the chest. For a moment, the power refracted off of him like a jet of water striking a wall.

He has some kind of shield! Robert thought as his guards prepared their own spells. And a powerful one at that! What a remarkable defense! An ordinary shield would crumble instantly under Al Jiwald's power. This man has talent! No matter. No shield will stand up to this kind of magic for long.

Five seconds later, as if the spell had broken through some protective layer, the beam stopped refracting and simply burrowed straight into Taiyang's chest.

That's done it! Robert thought with glee. Your preparations were masterful! I salute you as a fellow virtuoso of magic. You would have been well-prepared to face most mages in combat. But you're not in my league, fool!

The beam blazed on but the stranger stood there, unmoved and unmoving.

Robert's jaw dropped. *What's happening?! Whatever shield he had is gone! How is he just standing there and enduring this?! Is this some kind of heat protection magic?! Even so, he should be feeling the strain from maintaining it!*

Robert was so shocked by Taiyang's durability that he almost didn't realize that his spell should have already timed out. It had been the full ten seconds but his *Al Jiwald* was still going strong for some reason.

Robert didn't understand what was going on but he needed to stop before his mana was completely drained. Rather than rely on the spell timing out, Robert manually canceled it.

It didn't work.

The beam of unimaginable heat kept going. If anything, the energy pouring out of him was increasing in intensity. In desperation, Robert tried to jerk his hand away. It was hard. It felt like his hand was buried in solid rock but he finally managed to wrench his hand free and the spell canceled.

All around Taiyang, the darkness grew and the cold increased. The chill wind picked up, howling across the field. The wind was blowing in from every direction and blowing toward Taiyang.

He's feeding off my spell! Robert thought in disbelief and horror. Somehow he's stealing my mana and it's just making him stronger!

With a shout, Theodore ordered his guards to attack. Each mage flung spell after spell at Taiyang. Schooled by Robert's blundering into Taiyang's strange trap, no one tried to cast any spell that needed to be channeled. Instead they flung huge fireballs, enormous icicles harder than steel, blades of wind hard enough to shatter stone and huge boulders dredged up from the earth.

Taiyang calmly marched toward them. Each spell was sucked into Taiyang's shadow and vanished.

Robert fell to his knees. *He's still stealing my mana. And now he's stealing theirs as well.* Robert's mana was nearly gone and his entire body ached with exhaustion.

The peasantry were screaming in fear. A literal winter storm had formed around Taiyang and it was beginning to snow on the field. The wind howled all around them. The peasants ran for their lives, fighting the strange wind with each step as it tried to push them back toward Taiyang. The wind was blowing from every direction and it was all blowing toward Taiyang.

The peasants dashed toward the debatable safety of the city of Kocytos, yelling and screaming about witches and demons.

The guards threw spell after spell at Taiyang but nothing seemed to have any effect, much less harm him.

The guards were panting for breath. They were not only expending their mana in attack spells but Taiyang's savage black wind was drawing their mana way, drop by drop.

The guards looked at one another in terror.

As one, the guards broke and ran for their lives. Theodore, Robert's captain and long-time companion, waited perhaps an extra second or two but he knew that the fight was hopeless and he fled.

The guards were trying to run but the terrible wind and their own overpowering exhaustion meant that they stumbled away, only spared from Taiyang's wrath but their insignificance in his eyes.

Down on his knees, Robert tried to scream at them to stop but he had no strength left to yell.

Taiyang slowly approached Robert. Robert could do nothing but kneel there, panting for breath and shivering in the terrible cold.

"Me-Me-Mercy!" Robert whispered through chattering teeth.

Taiyang cocked his shadow head. "Very well," He intoned. "I shall show you mercy."

Robert's eyes lit up.

"I shall show you the mercy of the Frozen Wastes."

Robert looked up at Taiyang in sheer terror.

A hand, darker than night, gently grasped Robert's face. Robert was lifted with great strength up to Taiyang's face where he could be examined.

Even a scarce inch away from Taiyang's face, Robert could see nothing. It was like looking into the black ice atop a deep pond. There was nothing but darkness.

Robert gasped. If he'd had any more breath, he would have screamed. Robert was under the impression that he'd already been fully drained but now Taiyang's magic *dug in*.

Robert's mana was completely depleted and yet Taiyang's power still demanded more. Devouring every ounce of power Robert tried to save up. Robert's body felt like a rag doll. He felt weariness right down to his bones. Even to save his life he could not move a muscle.

Robert thought that about the grapefruit that he'd enjoyed this morning, brought from Vollachia at great expense. The fruit had been nearly bursting with juice. To draw out the flavor, Robert had taken a straw and plunged it into every single section one by one, drinking the delicious juice. By the end, the fruit must have thought that it was well and truly drained.

Until Robert had raised the fruit to his mouth and tore into its flesh with his teeth.

Robert now felt like that grapefruit. He'd been hollow before but now he was *more* than hollow. Taiyang was taking something from him, something that slipped away every time that he thought it that he'd managed to identify it. It was getting harder and harder to think, to remember anything.

Finally, Taiyang let Robert's shriveled and desiccated body fall to the ground.

The festival grounds were completely empty of people.

Taiyang turned and walked away.

It was the middle of the night when Subaru rode Patrasche to the house.

What the hell just happened?! How did I even do that?!

My Authority activated and it got me in trouble. That's basically what it does, what else is new? But what's up with this... 'Endless Hunger' shit? That's the second time that happened.

It seems fairly self-evident, A cold voice whispered in Subaru's mind. The magic was called 'Endless Hunger.' You devoured the magic around you. That's why those people fell to their knees. You drained their mana until they couldn't stand.

The area around you got cold because you were feeding off the mana in the air. It got dark because you devoured the light mana around you. It seems that the closer something is to you, the more you can drain.

You gripped that fool Robert and drained him dry. And now his strength is part of you. At least for the moment. It seems to fade relatively quickly. You also managed to steal a few years from him which could be very valuable.

Subaru shook his head. That seems like... kind of a stretch honestly. And why did I suddenly get a new power anyway? Was it a gift from Daphne?

And where did 'Taiyang' come from? I had already started talking to these assholes when I realized that I never picked out a fake name for myself! I knew that giving them my real one was a terrible idea. Taiyang just popped in my head and I rolled with it.

Was that the name of a Chinese Sun God? ...Maybe?

It doesn't matter. Nobody will recognize the name anyway. Fine. I'm 'Taiyang' now. 'The Witch of the Frozen Wastes.'

I can already imagine the look on Beatrice's face when I tell her that...

Those men kept throwing spells at me! Powerful spells! I used Indomitable to block the first one but once it timed out, I thought I was dead!

But somehow none of the spells hurt me! Honestly, I felt stronger every time one touched me.

I can feed off spells? If I really can devour mana now then I suppose that would make some sense...

And is it really making me stronger?

Subaru paused as he was about to put Patrasche in the stable.

Patrasche looked down at him questioningly.

"Hey, girl. You mind if I do an experiment?" He asked.

Patrasche cocked her head.

Subaru slid his arms under her stomach and picked up the riding dragon.

Patrasche gave a wild squawk of protest as her feet left the ground. The dragon instinctively tried to bolt forward but her claws didn't reach the ground and she flailed and struggled.

I'm holding her. I'm picking up at least eight hundred pounds of dragon and I don't even feel any strain.

Well, actually, I do feel strain but not in my muscles. I feel... a sort of... mental fatigue.

*Is that what it feels like when Emilia uses mana to increase her strength and speed?
Can I do it too now?*

I felt much stronger after devouring that... innkeeper the other day but it only lasted for a few hours. This will probably fade quickly too.

Patrasche slammed her chin down onto Subaru's head, not hard enough to bruise but hard enough to indicate serious disapproval.

"Oh. Sorry, girl," Subaru said, coming back to the present. "My mind wandered." He gently put her down on the ground.

Patrasche gave Subaru a deafening honk. The earth dragon seemed mortally offended.

"Sorry. I won't do it again."

The night was extremely cold for this time of year.

He put Patrasche in the stable, fed her and then spent a few minutes praising her for all the hard work she'd put in today.

The earth dragon finally mollified, Patrasche was more than ready to sleep.

Subaru crept to the house and opened the door quietly, hoping not to wake Emilia.

He heard a faint sobbing coming from upstairs.

Subaru sprang to the stairs and raced up to the second floor.

Subaru gasped.

Emilia huddled naked on the floor of her bedroom.

Emilia had pulled all of the blankets off the bed to cover herself in a desperate attempt to stay warm.

"Emilia!" He shouted, racing to her side. Her body felt like ice.

Emilia's face was a study in hopeless misery. "S-S-Subaru," She stuttered as he wrapped her in his arms and fought to warm her up. "Yo-You were gone for so long..."

Subaru didn't know what to say. "Mili, I... I'm sorry..."

"I tried... to take care of it myself," Emilia wept. "But... I couldn't get there alone and I couldn't climb back in bed either!"

"Get where?" Subaru asked in confusion.

Emilia's face twisted in abject shame and humiliation. "I needed to go to the bathroom!" She wailed in despair.

Subaru could only stare in horror as Emilia buried her face in his shoulder and cried.

Subaru realized that they were both kneeling in a puddle.

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

Subaru brought Emilia into the shower and helped her clean herself off.

Her expression was utterly humiliated.

Then he wrapped her in blankets and put her back into bed.

Emilia sat in bed, staring down at her hands with a numb, shamed expression as Subaru quickly scrubbed the mess off the floor.

"I'm so sorry, Subaru," Emilia whispered for the third time.

"No," Subaru said firmly, wishing he could punch himself in the face. *"I'm sorry. This is all my fault, Mili. I can't believe that I was this stupid."*

You fucking, unbelievable idiot! Emilia can't walk! What were you thinking, leaving her alone all goddamn day?! She hasn't eaten anything but raisins since lunch. It's almost midnight! She's all out of water! She couldn't get to the bathroom. She can't even get out of bed without your help, you fucking idiot! Thanks to you, she spent most of the night shivering on the floor in a puddle of her own pee!

It's no wonder that Emilia's self-esteem is in the trash after all this! And you deserve to be thrown into a trash-compactor for being so stupid!

Seriously, I wish I could smack myself with Indomitable. I should rip myself to pieces for this.

Or hell, I wish that Puck was here and he remembered who Emilia was. He'd have no trouble disciplining me for this...

Emilia took a ragged breath as Subaru finished cleaning. "I can't believe how pathetic I am," She whispered with tears in her eyes. "I can't even get to the *bathroom* by myself!" She burst into tears.

Subaru bolted to the bed and wrapped Emilia in his arms. She cried into his shoulder.

She shook and cried for a long time. Finally, her sobbing softened and she whispered, "I'm sorry..." in a broken voice.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Emilia, this was all my fault. *I'm sorry,*" Subaru said earnestly. "I was away much too long. This was all my stupidity. You did *nothing* wrong."

Emilia sniffled but it was clear she didn't believe him.

Subaru sighed. "Alright. Give me a few minutes and I'll throw us something together for dinner," Subaru promised. "You must be starving!"

Subaru finished wiping up the floor and then flew downstairs to make some soup and put away the food he'd bought at the festival.

While it cooked, Subaru then went back upstairs and sat down beside Emilia on the bed.

She turned her face away from him. Tears marks covered her face. She looked like she wanted to die from shame.

"Dinner will be ready soon, Mili," Subaru said as gently as he could. "Also, I brought you a few presents."

Emilia refused to look at him.

Subaru took out the books he'd purchased. "I thought that this would give you something to read while you were stuck in bed."

Subaru gently placed them in her lap.

Emilia looked down at the books and her face twisted in agony and despair. She swatted them off her lap so they crashed onto the floor.

Emilia buried her face in her hands and cried.

Subaru quickly wrapped his arms around her. Emilia stiffened at first and then buried her face in his chest. She wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him almost painfully as she wept, great wrenching sobs that threatened to tear her apart.

After Emilia had cried herself out, Subaru brought two bowls of soup up to the bedroom along with a tiny glass of *Vitae*.

He'd quickly refined some *Umbra* into more *Vitae* and he had enough medicine to keep Emilia stable for two more days.

"Come on, Mili," He prodded gently. "You must be starving."

Emilia sighed and begrudgingly sipped her soup.

Subaru didn't have much appetite either.

"How was Kocytos?" Emilia finally asked. "Did you find anything useful?"

Subaru hesitated. *OK. First of all, let's not discuss what happened at the Witch-Burning Festival. At all.*

Emilia would freak out and she's under enough stress as it is.

"Not really," He admitted. "I found some supplies but not it's the stuff I needed. And the doctors were no help at all."

Emilia's face fell. "Then... what do we do now?"

Subaru took a deep breath. "I don't really know yet," He admitted.

They both just sat there in silence.

"Alright, Mili," Subaru said calmly. "Let's wash you up again before bed. Maybe I can find some fresh sheets for the bed too."

Subaru woke up late the next morning after a long night of little sleep.

Subaru stared at the ceiling, deep in thought.

Alright, what's next? I need to cure Emilia and, depending on how many Years I stole from Robert, I have only a day or two to do it. That's the first thing. I have no idea where else to look for healers and none of the ones I spoke to in Kocytos would refer me to anyone else!

Alright. So I'm on my own. I need to cure Emilia myself. Daphne knows a variety of potions that can cure curses but they're all very specific and some of them take weeks to brew and can be very dangerous when ingested. I can't just feed Emilia two hundred different potions and hope to get lucky.

But maybe I can work smarter, not harder.

If I'm going to be able to do anything, I need to figure out exactly what kind of curse this is and then hope that I can find the cure in Daphne's memories.

Unfortunately, Daphne had no understanding of medicine at all. She knows what potion cures which curse but she has no recollection of what the different curses do, look like, or where they come from.

Subaru thought for a moment.

Well, what about process of elimination? I've read that powerful mabeasts can inflict curses on people. So I could try to investigate what curses can be inflicted by the mabeasts that we've encountered lately.

So that's the wolgarm and the Guiltylowe. We also bumped into the Big Guy in the forest but my instincts tell me that the Snow Blight wouldn't bother using curses. He was more about smashing stuff.

And let's be honest, we've only encountered one monster in the past few days that seems powerful enough to cast this kind of curse. A curse potent enough to threaten a whole city.

The Black Water.

And the Black Water is still around. I mean... yeah, it's dead but its corpse is still back there in the forest. It just looks like the world's ugliest modern art sculpture.

What if I took a quick trip into the forest today? I could grab a piece of the corpse, come back here and analyze it in the lab. Daphne knew lots of tricks for analyzing magical systems using chemistry. She was no expert in magical theory and neither am I but maybe I can use Reason and Judgment to bridge that gap and figure out what kind of curse I'm dealing with.

Yeah, I know it's a long shot but why not? It's not like I have any better avenues of investigation.

Actually, if I go to the forest today then Emilia needs to come with me. I can't leave her alone.

Even ignoring the accident she had yesterday, an accident which was completely foreseeable to anyone with half-a-working brain and yet strangely enough not to me, Emilia is just too vulnerable if I leave her here alone.

She has no magic and she can't move. And she's in a country crammed full of people who hate her.

Yeah. I can't just leave her here alone.

That said, taking Emilia on Patrasche in her condition won't be easy but I think we need to figure out how to do it. We never know when we might need to flee in a hurry.

Subaru glanced at Emilia and realized her eyes were open. She looked at him with a dead, despairing gaze.

"Oh!" Subaru said, fighting to sound cheerful. "Good morning, Emilia. How did you sleep?"

Emilia sighed. "Fine, I guess."

Subaru took a deep breath and then forged ahead. "Mili, I think we should try taking a little trip today."

"A trip?"

Subaru nodded. "I want to make a quick trip back to the forest. I want to look for some regents for potions that make help cure you," He said evasively.

I don't want her to be thinking about taking samples of the Black Water. Knowing Emilia, that might freak her out.

Emilia looked conflicted. "I don't know, Subaru. I can't use my legs..."

"I know," Subaru sighed. "And that's *why* I want you to come. We should try to get some experience riding Patrasche like... *this* when there's nothing at stake. We don't want to try to figure out how to do it when we're running for our lives so this is going to be like a... practice run."

Emilia thought that over and finally nodded.

Also the people of Stoneybrooke are rabid, xenophobic lunatics who might try to visit Nicholas while I'm gone. I'm not going to leave you alone here for half the day when anyone could walk through that door!

The trip to the forest was slow. Not only was it a long way but Subaru and Emilia had to try several different positions before they figured out something that could work. Patrasche's saddle wasn't designed with cripples in mind and Emilia couldn't use her legs to hold on.

They went some distance with Emilia sitting behind Subaru and holding on to him but her arms quickly got exhausted. She couldn't use her legs to help keep her balance and with her mana sealed, she couldn't augment her strength.

They only made it a few miles before Emilia needed to stop and rest.

They tried to put Emilia in front and have Subaru hold onto her while Emilia took the reins. However, Emilia had no experience controlling a dragon and she struggled to direct the increasingly annoyed Patrasche.

Finally, they had Emilia sit facing backwards in front of Subaru and hold onto him while Subaru took the reins and wrapped his arms around her to help steady her as much as he could.

It was a very awkward ride but it was the best they could come up with.

It was late afternoon when they reached the forest.

"Mili," Subaru said. "Why don't we go check the, um... statues while we're here? It's been a few days."

Emilia sighed and buried her face in his shoulder. "It's been months, Subaru," She whispered. "They must be completely buried by now."

Subaru blinked. "Oh. Uh," He cleared his throat. "I guess I forgot to tell you about that. The day we fought the Black Water, I went up on the hill and cleaned all the statues off."

Emilia trembled. "You did?" Emilia whispered.

"Yeah. Um. Mili, I'm... I'm really sorry for everything I said during that fight we had. I was an idiot."

Emilia squeezed him tighter. "Thank you, Subaru," She whispered.

Subaru rode Patrasche up to the hill. Patrasche dropped to the ground and Subaru dismounted with Emilia in his arms.

She sighed. "My arms are tired," She moaned.

Yeah. Imagine how I feel. I've been supporting your weight the whole trip.

"OK, let's do a little cleanup, OK?" Subaru suggested.

The statues were still mostly clean from Subaru's last visit but they went around and cleaned them off anyway.

"Well, we did something good today at least," Subaru murmured.

Emilia sighed. "Subaru... do you think... do you think you could give me a moment alone with them?"

Subaru blinked in surprise. "Sure."

Subaru whistled and Patrasche ran over. The dragon dropped down and Subaru gently placed Emilia on the saddle.

Subaru flashed her a deprecating grin. "Sorry. It's the best seat I could find."

Emilia gave him a fond smile. "Thank you, Subaru."

"I'll be down here. I'm just going to check on something," He said, walking down the hill.

Emilia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked around at all the terrified faces surrounding her, all the people frozen in ice for all these many long years.

"I'm back," Emilia whispered. "I just wanted to come here and say that... I'm truly sorry. I... I can't save you..."

Emilia waited a moment but the only reply came from the whistling wind.

"I really tried to save all of you," Emilia muttered, sounding like a lost little girl. "I wanted... so badly to make up for what I did. But I can't. All I've done to everyone I've ever met is bring them tragedy and lead them into disaster after disaster. I can't even walk anymore. The dragon blood is gone. Our friends turned against us. I can't do anything. I can't save you..."

Emilia stifled a sob. "But I want you to know that you'll still *be* saved. Subaru will find a way. He always does. He'll save you."

Emilia hesitated and then shook her head in despair. "Subaru will save you. Because I *can't*. And... I thought that I owed it to all of you to say that to your faces. I can't do anything to help you. I can't do anything at all. All I'm good for is leaching off of kind people and convincing them to take care of me. First it was Mother Fortuna, then Puck, and now Subaru..."

Emilia took a deep breath and forced a broad smile on her face. "But you'll be free soon. Subaru will find a way. I know that you all hate me but... Subaru and I don't have to live here after we break the curse. We can go somewhere else. And my magic is sealed. So I can't hurt anyone anymore."

She thought for a moment. "It's funny. Maybe being useless is actually an improvement for me. Before this, all I could do is ruin other people's lives..."

Subaru marched down the hill to the place he had fought the Black Water.

There was nothing left but a pile of muck, tiny pieces of debris like the shredded twigs of the world's ugliest thorn-bush, and a bed of black dust.

Oh right. I shattered this thing into powder after I dried it out. I forgot about that.

I was thinking that it still looked like that statue.

Well, maybe I can still get what I need.

Subaru reached down and picked up the remains of one of the Black Water's gnashing tentacles. It was a fat, coarse 'thorn' slightly larger than Subaru's hand.

He slid it into his pocket.

Subaru glanced up the hill. Emilia was sitting on Patrasche but she didn't seem to be talking. She just sat there staring out into the distance with a morose expression on her face.

"I wonder if she's done yet," Subaru murmured. "I'll head back up there. I don't want her brooding right now. We should be getting out of here anyway. It gets cold in the forest at night and Emilia doesn't have her mana to stay warm."

Subaru remounted Patrasche and helped Emilia settle into his arms.

"Subaru," She mumbled. "I'm suddenly getting really tired."

Subaru frowned. "I bet the medicine is starting to wear off. It's been almost twenty four hours since we gave you that last dose. Fuck, I should have thought to bring more!"

"I'm fine, Subaru," Emilia murmured. "I'm not in any pain. I'm just sleepy."

Subaru kissed her hair. "We'll get home quick as we can. Try to get some sleep."

"Do you know the way back?" Emilia asked, sounding barely awake.

Subaru smiled. "I remember what you showed me today and I can follow Patrasche's tracks out of the forest. By the way, Mili, we do need to pass by the village on our way out. Do you want to stop there? You must be feeling awfully bored being stuck in bed all day. Maybe we could get you some books? Or a puzzle or something?"

Emilia didn't answer.

Subaru frowned and gently moved her face so he could look at her.

Emilia was snoring softly. Unlike the other day when she was panting for breath due to the curse, now her breathing was smooth, deep and even.

Subaru smiled and gently kissed her forehead. "Sweet dreams, Mili."

Subaru nudged Patrasche and they took off.

With Emilia sound asleep and unable to hold onto him, Subaru had to learn to control the reins with one hand and use the other hand to hold Emilia. This was very difficult and his success in the venture was mostly due to Patrasche's determination to heed her master's instruction. They went slower than normal but they still keep up a decent speed.

It was full dark when Patrasche struck the frozen river.

The dragon leaped onto the frozen water and flew up it at great speed, not needing any direction from Subaru to follow the river.

Then Subaru nudged and Patrasche left the river and charged across an open meadow.

Suddenly, Subaru noticed something and he reined in Patrasche sharply.

The earth dragon honked in protest but Subaru pointed off into the distance.

The earth dragon quieted when she noticed a large fire burning through the trees.

"People? In the forest?" Subaru whispered.

Are they here for us?! Could it be Reinhard or worse, the Sin Archbishops?!

Subaru sat on top of Patrasche for a long moment, wondering what to do.

Subaru looked down at the sleeping Emilia and bit her lip.

We could just keep going... but that means that we won't know who else might be in the forest. We still plan to come back here so strangers in the forest would be a real problem.

I need to find out who they are. Not to mention that if it really is anyone looking for us, they're already way too close to Stoneybrooke.

Ideally, I'd take Emilia back to the elven village first where she'd be safe and then come back here and investigate. But the problem is that if I do that, it's going to take me a while to get back here and the night is passing.

Worse, if the people here are looking for a fight and they're something I can't handle, I'll need to escape them, evade their pursuit without revealing the way back to the village, then find Emilia, and get her out of the forest without letting these people find Emilia first.

That's... a heavy proposition.

On the other hand, if a fight breaks out and I do have Emilia with me, then I'll be hamstrung in the fight. That's not a happy thought either.

But if I can get just close enough to discover who these people are while Emilia is with me then I can take more effective action. If it's nobody we care about then we could just ignore them.

Maybe this is a stroke of luck, A cold voice in Subaru's mind observed. You only have another three days of life for Emilia. Perhaps here you'll find the chance to procure more.

Subaru's eyes widened. *What the hell?! I'm not just going to start hunting folks down for raw materials! What's the matter with me?*

You should focus on the problem at hand. Emilia's life is in jeopardy. That must be your only concern.

Subaru shuddered.

I need to focus here. If it is Reinhard or Regulus then hopefully there'll be no reason to fight at all. We'll just slip away before they see us. I'll turn Patrasche around and head toward...

Fuck. Where is left for us to hide? If Reinhard or Regulus has found the forest then Nicholas's house won't be a refuge for long. It's only a matter of time before someone hears about what I did in the inn.

If we need to flee this area then where do we go? Head west to Kararagi and trust to luck?

Alright. That doesn't matter right now. If this is trouble, the first priority will be to get out of here. I'll go somewhere else. Where that is can be figured out on the road.

All the same, I might need some back up.

Without even pausing to wonder how to do it, Subaru sent out a call.

Subaru considered leaving Patrasche and Emilia behind while he crept up closer to the fire but ultimately decided against it. If he really needed to run, having to remount Patrasche quickly while carrying Emilia in his arms would complicate matters considerably.

As it was, the earth dragon crept closer and closer to the fire. Patrasche seemed to understand the need to be quiet but this wasn't an ability that riding dragons had ever evolved and her footsteps in the soft snow sounded thunderous to Subaru.

The fire had a group of men surrounding it. The camp was substantive, with probably enough tents for thirty people. There were also six large carts loaded with goods.

I don't see any earth dragons, Subaru thought. I'm guessing these men are probably pulling the carts themselves. In the dense forest, they wouldn't move much slower pulling these wagons than an earth dragon would.

But what are they doing here? Are they merchants? Why are they trying to pass through the forest?

Subaru strained his ears, trying to listen to the conversation of the men around the campfire.

"Is anybody going to be able to sleep tonight?" One fat man with a short gray beard grumbled. He had the bright red nose of a hard drinker. He was dressed in patched, old clothes and he had a rusty sword belted at his side.

"Will you relax, Joe?" A younger man with a long face and large hands said. "We haven't seen so much as a squirrel since we came into these woods."

The fat man spat into the fire. "Young men. Their eyes look but they never see. Doesn't that seem ominous to any of you? When the animals avoid a place, there's probably a good reason for it!"

"Forget it, Bob," A grizzled old man with a pipe said to the younger one. "Joe's just that sort. Always throwing salt over his shoulder and talking about making money whenever his palm itches!"

"You may say so, Tim, but mark my words: Lady Koi has sent us all into peril just to save a few coppers! This forest is cursed and everybody knows it!" Joe snapped.

"All the better, Joe! The curse can't be meant for us," Bob pointed out, "But the local garrison isn't going to pursue us through a cursed forest. We'll be over the border and into Gusteko in half the time!"

"There are mabeasts in these woods," Joe grumbled. "Big ones. And my grandmother once saw the Witch of the Woods. She said that devils roam this forest and sometimes they come through the villages in the dead of night, tempting men into dark accords."

Witch of the Woods?! Do these men remember Emilia?!

...No, probably not. I'm guessing that they just have stories handed down to them about the other elves who lived in the forest before they were frozen.

"Is this the same grandmother who used to drink paint when she couldn't afford liquor?" Tim asked in a bored voice.

Bob waved a large hand dismissively. "We can handle a few mabeasts, Joe. We've got thirty men! There's nothing about us that should attract the attention of anything big and we can run off a few wolgarm," Bob said.

"Wolgarm are one thing, boy but there are Guiltylowe in the forest. Rumors say that there's even a Snow Blight in these woods. Ever seen one? A small army would struggle to bring it down!" Joe growled.

I can vouch for that.

"Ignore this old fool, Bob," Tim muttered, refilling his pipe. "Snow Blights are attracted to mana. It takes a large amount of mana to get the attention of a Guiltylowe, much less a Snow Blight. That's why the Lady sent us instead of her best guards."

"You're an idiot, Tim," Joe snapped. "Not that that's news. I knew that you were an idiot twenty years ago. Lady Koi sent us because we're expendable. If we don't make it to Gusteko alive, she hasn't lost much."

"Forget it," Tim grumbled. "We'll be out of the forest by end of day tomorrow and over the border into Gusteko. We'll deliver the Lady's goods to the distributor and head back along the main road. No need for hiding then."

Bob picked at his chin. "You know, me and some of the boys were talking about doing a little hunting while we're in here..."

Tim squinted at him. "Hunting? Nothing lives in these forests except mabeasts. And mabeast meat would turn a rodent sick," Tim replied.

"Nah, Tim. They're talking about going hunting for the Witch of the Wood," Bob whispered.

The two older men sat there in stupefied silence.

Joe's jaw hung open. "Gods above. Lady Koi really *is* trying to get rid of all the mental deadwood in the organization," Joe mourned. "Why the hell am I here?!"

"Have you gone *completely* insane, Bob?" Tim asked.

"What? We got more than twenty strong lads with us, plus you old codgers," Bob snickered. "We sneak up on the witch real quiet-like and then: Off with her head! There's a big reward for captured or killed Cultists, you know."

Subaru scowled.

"Witches and Witch Cultists are two different things, you slack-jawed gewgaw," Joe said in a pained voice. "If the whole lot of you go chasing after a witch, there won't be enough of you left to bury! Unless you she turns you into something unnatural or puts you in the stew."

Subaru realized he was clenching the reins hard enough to drive his own nails into his palms. He slowly forced himself to relax.

Alright. So they're smugglers...

They must be planning to use the forest as a shortcut into Gusteko to avoid the authorities. It's not a bad strategy actually. But it can't be allowed.

I get the impression that this 'Koi' sent these smugglers into the forest as a test run. If they succeed, more and more people will start coming into the forest.

That can't be allowed, The cold voice pointed out. It's an unacceptable risk. And they've already threatened to kill Emilia. Thirty men will provide an admirable amount of life...

"Up, lads!" A voice shouted from behind Subaru. "We've got an intruder!"

Subaru spun around, cursing himself for a fool. He saw another grubby man standing in the darkness behind him.

Of course, the camp would have sentries keeping watch, you idiot!

The men in the camp were all springing to their feet with cries of alarm. Every man raised a sword or drew a bow.

"Who're you now?" Joe shouted, marching over toward Subaru.

Subaru looked at the crowd of armed men. He didn't much like his chances. Especially with the sleeping Emilia in his arms.

"I could ask you the same question!" Subaru shouted defiantly. "What are you fools doing in my forest?"

"*Your* forest?!" Joe shouted incredulously. "Nothing lives in this wood 'cept mabeasts and monsters."

"And which do you think / am?" Subaru snapped.

"Subaru?" Emilia murmured.

Subaru looked down as Emilia woke up at the absolute *worst* possible time. She shook her head blearily and her hood fell away from her face.

The smugglers all gasped and raised their voices. "It's a witch!" One screamed.

Bob laughed. "Looks like our prey has come to us then! And she looks sick!"

Emilia's head darted around trying to understand what was going on. Her eyes were wide with fear.

"There is a big price for witches in Gusteko," Joe mused. His face grew sly. "Tell you what, friend. My boys and I are feeling generous tonight. Give us the witch and the dragon we'll let you get out of here with your skin."

Emilia shut her eyes tight. "Will you promise to leave Subaru alone-" She called to the men in a despairing voice.

"Shut up, Mili!" Subaru said like the crack of a whip.

Emilia flinched.

"Subaru?" Joe said in surprise. "Subaru Natsuki?!"

Emilia bit her lip and closed her eyes, once again cursing her own stupidity.

Subaru took a deep breath and drew himself up. "The Invincible," Subaru said bluntly. Emilia had definitely compromised their ability to stay in the forest by admitting who they were but there was no time to worry about that right now. "How much you want to bet that a couple of cheap smugglers and sell-swords can handle the man who killed a troll with his bare hands?"

The smugglers muttered to one another, looking aggravated.

This isn't good. These guys aren't fighters and normally they would have backed down. But they can sense Emilia's weakness and they're getting excited like any predator would. They're used to going after the sick and the lame. They know that fighting while trying to protect Emilia will hamstring me and they think that gives them a chance. I don't know what the bounty on witches is but it must be too good to pass up.

The talking among the smugglers died down. "There's thirty of us and one of you!" Joe snapped. "Even if those rumors about killing a troll is true, you're not going to be able to handle all of us."

Subaru took a ragged breath.

"Subaru," Emilia whispered, tears streaming down her face. "Save yourself..."

"I'm going to give you exactly one chance," Subaru said in a cold voice. "Leave the forest now and never return. Otherwise I'm not going to be responsible for the consequences. You will all die here. And no matter how much you beg, your cries for mercy will *not* be heeded."

Some of the smugglers looked nervous but most looked unimpressed. "I think we're going to take our chances, pal," Bob snorted.

Subaru nodded with a grim look on his face. "As you wish," He promised. He looked at Emilia. "Emilia, I want you to *promise* me something," Subaru said firmly.

Emilia blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you," He said. "And cover your ears."

"But-"

"*Promise* me!" Subaru snapped.

Emilia flinched. She shut her eyes and covered her ears. "I promise. Promises are important and I must keep my promises!" She whimpered.

The smugglers were all laughing out loud at this.

Subaru scowled down at them. "You promised to let me get out of here with my life if I gave you everything," His voice was venomous. "I am more gracious. I'll leave you with everything and simply take your lives. *Endless Hunger*."

Every bonfire and torch blew out simultaneously. A great wind picked up, buffeting the smugglers' as they cried out in fear and confusion.

The forest around them was now impenetrably dark. Even once their eyes adjusted, they could still see nothing.

A moment or two passed and then they realized they could see *something*.

A great figure mounted on an earth dragon that was a silhouette, darker than the darkness. The figure was the heart of a great vortex that seemed to steal every ray of light in the dim forest and suck it into his great shadow.

Every man in the camp recoiled. None of them had ever experienced fear like this before. It lashed at their minds like a physical thing. It was very much like a child's primeval fear of darkness; unquestionable and all consuming.

In each his own way, these were all hard and bad men. None of them in their life had escaped someone warning them of damnation. But only tonight did they finally understand what that truly meant. They stared at a being who was darkness beyond darkness. These were hard men and against a witch they had all been prepared to sell their lives dearly but now facing this monster all courage and defiance deserted them. Swords dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers. Each man could think of nothing but crawling and hiding and death.

The man cocked his head. "What madness bade you to enter into my forest?" He asked almost politely. His voice was deep and inhuman.

"Uh," Joe began. He tried to speak but choked and then tried again with no more success. Joe took a step forward, raising his hands in surrender. "Forgive us, my lord. We had absolutely no idea that this here forest was your property." He said lamely.

The man didn't answer immediately. "No idea? Are you saying that you did not know that this forest was the property of Taiyang, Witch of the Wastes? Whose curse blights

the very air that you breathe? Whose will dominates every witchbeast within this forest?"

Joe swallowed hard. "I'm afraid not, my lord. My men and I aren't too wise, you understand. We're only in this forest at all because Lady Koi ordered us to!"

"And who is Lady Koi?" Taiyang asked.

"Our employer, sir! She runs the smuggling branch of the Black Silver Coins cartel," Joe said.

Bob winced to hear Joe give up their employer this easily. Lady Koi would certainly have the lot of them killed if she found out about this but right now that seemed to be the least of their problems.

"Hm. And *whom* told you to threaten my bride?" Taiyang's voice grew sharp as a frozen blade.

Joe gasped for air. For some reason, he was struggling to catch his breath. Around him, the men fell to their knees, one after another as their strength gave out.

"We didn't know she was yours, master! I swear!" Joe squeaked, struggling to make his voice loud enough for Taiyang to hear his groveling but his sudden exhaustion was profound. "Please, grant us mercy! We'll pay any price you ask!"

Taiyang didn't answer right away. "I'm afraid you're confused. If you saw a mosquito about to infect your love with Dengue fever, you wouldn't stop to ask it what it had to offer. You'd just squash it flat. Of course in that case, the mosquito is innocent, simply following its nature. You all acted out of your own malice. Your own greed."

The camp was silent except for the rushing wind of Taiyang's great vortex.

"You tried to take her away from me. No one will *ever* threaten my Emilia ever again," Taiyang said in the voice of doom.

Bob was so tired that he could barely speak but he fought to rise to his feet.

Just then a deafening roar came from behind him.

Bob craned his neck to see a Guiltylowe sink its great fangs into Joe's large gut and ripping out a massive chunk of flesh and organs the size of a pig.

The massive mabeast almost glowed fluorescent blue in Taiyang's strange non-light.

Joe's body collapsed in on itself as he fell to the ground, a great pool of blood spreading around him while Joe screamed and his limbs thrashed helplessly.

The Guiltylowe paid no attention to Joe's screams and returned for a second great bite of flesh, chewing his organs as the man slowly died, his eyes wide with horror.

Tim was driven to the ground as five wolgarm leaped upon him. The wolf-like monsters wolgarm didn't bother with a killing blow, simply tearing great mouthfuls of flesh from Tim's body as they went into a feeding frenzy.

Bob heard a low growl behind him and whirled around with his rapier extended in a trembling hand.

The Guiltylowe bit through Bob's sword arm in one great chomp.

Bob staggered back his eyes wide as a river of blood poured out of his missing arm. Bob stared at his arm that now ended just below the shoulder with horrified amazement. He raised the remains of his arm and watched it tremble and the blood flow increase.

The Guiltylowe chewed thoughtfully on Bob's forearm for a moment or two and then let it fall out of its mouth with the rapier still tightly gripped in the hand.

Bob stumbled backwards and landed on the ground. Bob saw the Guiltylowe's eyes narrow in dreadful intent and he began frantically crawling backwards.

"Leave me alone, you devil!" Bob screamed in a barely audible voice.

The Guiltylowe pounced and pinned Bob down with one great paw. Then its maw descended on Bob's midsection and he felt the beast's teeth tear him in half. Bob's final sight was the mabeast standing over him, chewing. The beast let the great mass of flesh fall out of its jaws without bothering to swallow any of it and then it went back for a second bite as Bob's vision faded.

Subaru watched it all impassively. Each fading life was absorbed by his power.

In less than two minutes, the carnage was done. The former campsite was now a field of torn-up bodies.

Subaru dispelled *Endless Hunger*.

He looked down at Emilia. Her eyes were still clenched tight and she had her ears covered. Her face was buried in Subaru's chest and she was whispering: 'Promises are important and I must keep my promises' to herself in a terrified mantra.

Huh. This might be the first time in my life I really didn't feel any guilt at all about killing someone. I even freaked out after killing the slavers.

These guys were just smugglers but they still threatened Emilia. And that means they needed to die. And I've certainly gained a large number of years to sustain Emilia.

They're just like those villagers in Stoneybrooke. They hated the very idea of Emilia so much that they were willing to kill her!

This world isn't some happy fantasy. It's kill or be killed. I'm just lucky that I have enough power to make sure that the people I love stay safe.

Subaru suddenly thought about Beatrice and a wave of misery swept over him that threatened to bring him to tears.

No. Don't think that way. Yes, Reinhard took Beatrice away but I will get her back. We're going to all live in the forest together and raise our family.

And it might be my imagination but the mabeasts seem to be behaving a lot... friendlier now. They looked at me like they wanted to eat me alive last time I saw them. Now they seem to be... at least tolerating me. Maybe it's the Authority of Gluttony?

I'll bind all the mabeasts in the forest to me and set them to guard the woods. Hell, they probably would have killed anyone who came into the forest anyway but I'll tell them to focus on it.

It's almost too bad that I killed that Snow Blight. I bet I could have bound him with Pridebreaker if I'd had a little more practice.

Maybe I can find another one?

I wonder what the smugglers were shipping. It might be something useful. Maybe I should check it out.

Subaru glanced down at Emilia who had her face buried in his chest, her shut eyes streaming tears, and her hands tightly clamped over her ears.

No. Whatever is in those carts will keep until tomorrow. Right now, I need to take care of Emilia.

Patrasche made a nervous honk but Subaru patted the earth dragon's face reassuringly. "It's OK, girl. These are... *my* mabeasts. They won't hurt you."

Patrasche did not look entirely reassured by this statement and looked around at the massive crowd of mabeasts with a nervous expression.

The mabeasts for their part were basically just lazing around a vast field of torn up bodies. The mabeasts seemed to lose all interest in their meal the instant that it died. They were sitting around, cleaning the blood off their fur in the snow and waiting patiently for further instructions. A few looked curiously at the earth dragon but none approached.

"Thanks, guys," Subaru said to the mabeasts. "You can all take off now."

Subaru nudged Patrasche and the earth dragon slowly ambled out of the field of carnage with many nervous backward looks at the mabeast horde. The bemused mabeasts watched the earth dragon depart.

Subaru went a few hundred yards away from the field where neither mabeast nor corpse could be seen any longer and then he reined in.

Emilia was still chanting 'Promises are important' to herself and her eyes and ears were both shut tight.

Subaru stroked Emilia's hair gently.

She stiffened for a moment and then relaxed into Subaru's body, slowly catching her breath.

Subaru gently peeled one of her hands off her ear. "You can relax now," He whispered in her ear.

Emilia cautiously opened one eye and looked around. Then she opened the other and finally took her hands away from her ears.

"Subaru," Emilia said in a barely audible whisper. "What happened? Those men- What did we-"

"We did what was necessary," Subaru said in a soothing voice while he rubbed her back.

Emilia started panting for breath. She seemed poised to go into hysterics. "Those men died because of me! Because I was here! Because I-" She was looking all around the forest as if desperately seeking an escape from her guilt.

"Emilia!" Subaru said firmly. "Look at me."

Emilia took a deep breath and stared at Subaru, her expression both terrified and hopeful.

Subaru stroked her hair. "That's it. Look at me. Just look at me. Think of nothing but me," He whispered.

Emilia slowly started to catch her breath.

"Emilia," Subaru said gently. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Of course, I do."

"You love me, don't you?"

"You know, I do."

Subaru nodded. "Emilia, those were bad men. They *needed* to die," Subaru said in a voice of absolute certainty.

Emilia bit her lip. "Subaru. I don't know. They were bad men but... we could have run! They couldn't have caught us! We didn't need to-"

"You trust me, right?" Subaru prodded.

Emilia hesitated. "Yes," She whispered.

"Then you trust my judgment, right?"

There was a longer pause. "Yes," She admitted.

"And you know I'd never hurt anyone if I didn't have to. So if I kill someone, you can be sure that they needed to die and that it was necessary," Subaru finished.

Emilia was silent for a long time. Emilia was not very well educated but even she saw the flaws in Subaru's argument. She knew she should point them out. She should remind him that she loved him, she would support him, and that she would always be there for him but that wasn't a license to ignore basic morality.

People should only be killed to prevent them from killing other people. Applying their own judgment to who 'deserved' to die and acting as executioners on that judgment was a very slippery slope.

Emilia knew that this was the right thing to say and that she should remind Subaru of this. She should remind him that he was better than this. That Emilia believed in him. That Subaru would always be her hero and she knew that no matter how bad things got, Subaru could always rise above it and still make the kind of choices that had earned him the admiration of a whole kingdom.

She should do these things. But...

I'm so very, very tired, Emilia thought. I'm tired of the struggle and the fear and the constant pain...

Everyone tells you to take the high road. But it's so hard.

We tried to act like heroes. But I'm no hero. I never was.

Subaru is a hero. But is that fair to him? Why does he have to work so hard for people who mistrust and resent him. Why does he always have to do 'the right thing' when it's always so hard?

Can't we just be Subaru and Emilia?

Emilia took a deep breath. She sat there, deep in thought and Subaru waited for her to finish thinking.

Subaru needs something from me. He presented it as an argument but it's really a request. He just wants me to trust him. To trust him even when it's not easy. Even when I have doubts.

And I can do that.

All I have to do is choose to do that.

Trust is first and foremost a choice. A choice to believe in the people you love.

Maybe the facts don't always line up the way that Subaru claims they do but... isn't our love more important than some inconvenient fact or obscure point of morality?

I can trust him. I can offer him real faith. Unquestioning trust. All I need to do is choose to.

And what's wrong with that?

Emilia took a deep breath. "Subaru," She said calmly. "Are you telling me that these men deserved and needed to die?" She asked as if just confirming.

Subaru nodded. "They did," He said simply.

Emilia leaned up and gently kissed Subaru. "Then they lived too long. You're the kindest man in the world, Subaru," She said sincerely. "If you say that they deserved to die then I know the world will be a better place because of their deaths. I trust you, Subaru. I always have and I always will."

The two embraced and held each other close.

Emilia made a small sound of contentment. She felt as if she'd broken another chain in her life. She didn't have to be more than what she was. She didn't have to be a hero or some champion of righteousness. She could just be Emilia, lover of Subaru. It was all she wanted.

It was all that she'd ever need.

It was late when they got back to the house. In spite of the shock and tension of the fight with the smugglers, Emilia drifted off to sleep quickly and slept the entire way home.

Subaru carried her up the stairs and gently laid her on top of the bed.

By now, her cursed wounds were leaking blood and foul matter so Subaru woke her up.

Emilia reluctantly opened her eyes.

"Mili, we're home."

Emilia looked around. "Is this 'home' now?" She asked curiously.

Subaru hesitated. "Well, it is for the moment," Subaru replied, handing her a dose of *Vitae*. "Let's get you cleaned up and give you your medicine."

An hour later, Subaru had made dinner. Emilia was clearly going out of her way to try and be more cheerful and positive.

Subaru helped her go to the bathroom and clean herself off in the shower. Then he laid her down in bed and urged her to get some sleep.

"Aren't you coming to bed, Subaru?" She asked in a thick voice.

"Soon," He promised. "I'll be up soon. I need to check something in the lab first."

Emilia nodded. "OK," She sounded right on the verge of sleep.

'Soon' is a relative term and Subaru sat in the lab for several hours. The *Umbra* continued to cook but that was no great help since he already had more *Umbra* than he had sal-ammoniac to refine it with.

All the same, by the time he had finished processing the lives he'd stolen tonight, he had produced three Decades of *Vitae* and another seven Years as well.

All told this should last us over a month. But I'm completely out of sal-ammoniac. I can't make more Vitae without it.

At the same time, Subaru spent the evening using every technique of chemical analysis that Daphne had inserted into his brain on the fragment of the Black Water.

By the end of all this, he was fantastically frustrated.

Excellent work, Subaru! Truly top notch.

You now know the precise chemical composition of the Black Water!

Just one question, what exactly do you plan to do with that knowledge?

Because the next step was one that you were always a little fuzzy on. You would learn more about the Black Water and that would help you cure Emilia by... doing what exactly?

Did you think you would discover that the Black Water contained sulfides and then you'd be able to look up some sort of 'sulfide curse' that you could assume Emilia was afflicted with?

You really didn't think this through.

Subaru was tired, frustrated, and feeling helpless.

He wanted to go up to bed and try to come up with a new plan tomorrow but he was angry and he didn't want to go up to Emilia while he was still visibly angry and risk making her even more stressed.

Subaru diverted himself by cleaning up the lab as he waited for his rage to subside.

After a short time, the fire of his rage had burned down to the cold ashes of despair.

What do I do next? What do I even try?

Subaru heard a sound coming from the basement.

His heart stopped.

I never went down to the basement since I've been here. Could there be something down there? Someone?

Bullshit. Nobody would have hidden in the house all this time without us catching some sign of them.

But maybe tonight somebody sneaked in down there through the outside bulkhead?

Subaru took a deep breath. He silently opened the basement door and then crept down the winding staircase as quietly as he possibly could.

Wait a minute. What the hell am I doing? Why am I sneaking around? I'm not in any danger! Unless my uninvited guest is Regulus or Capella, I'll turn him into dust with one punch!

Well, yeah but don't get too cocky, He reconsidered. Indomitable requires that I know that an attack is coming in order to time it properly. If I get ambushed from behind, I'm finished.

Conceding both points as valid, Subaru continued to sneak into the basement.

The basement was full of odds and ends and assorted junk of no particular interest. Subaru ignored it. His eyes were locked onto a light.

There was a hooded figure in the corner of the basement, next to the heavy door that led outside. They were facing away from Subaru and appeared to be studying something. A small lamp burned on a chest nearby to provide light.

Subaru crept through the crowded basement, getting closer and closer to the stranger so that they would have no chance to escape. The stranger wore a hooded blue cloak.

As Subaru approached he stepped on a loose stone in the floor and it made a soft grinding sound.

The figure spun around and drew a small knife. They flung themselves at Subaru with a cry.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*. He made a quick calculation and he seized the stranger's wrist effortlessly. Subaru bolted around behind the intruder and forced their arm up behind their back.

The stranger dropped the knife to the ground with a shrill cry of pain.

Their hood fell down revealing red hair.

Subaru's jaw dropped.

"Anri?!" He said in a tone of disgust. He let go of the girl's arm and shoved her hard so that Anri went staggering across the basement, trying to regain her balance. "What the fuck are you *doing* here?!"

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

Anri stared at him in disbelief. "Subaru?" She whispered. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I asked you first," He grated. "Not to mention sneaking into someone else's house doesn't entitle you to hold an interrogation. So what the fuck are you doing here?!"

Anri stared at him, speechless for a long moment as she adjusted the arm in her sling. Then she took a deep breath. "Hiding."

"What?"

Anri sighed. "After we left you guys in Stoneybrooke, Victoire, Vera, and I tried to make our way back to Siros."

"Who?" Subaru asked.

Anri flushed. "Oh right. You wouldn't know them. You slept through that."

Subaru growled impatiently.

Anri hurried along. "So, we tried to make our way back home. We got close to Siros but Sanshi has patrols all over the area and we got separated. Vera tried to draw them away from us and when some of those patrols followed me and Victoire, she tried to do the same thing. She told me to meet her near the ford but..."

Subaru waited. "But?" He grated, folding his arms across his chest.

Anri sighed. "I had... I guess you'd call it... a premonition," She said awkwardly. "That going to the ford would be dangerous. That it would probably end with me getting killed. So I went the other way. I couldn't find Victoire or Vera after that and I just kept running for days. Finally... I wound up here."

Subaru thought that over for a long minute. "Bullshit!" He said flatly.

Anri blinked. "Excuse me?"

"That story is one hundred percent *bullshit!*" Subaru said firmly.

Anri's face grew affronted. "Excuse me! I-"

"Do you *really* expect me to believe for a single second that by sheer random chance, of all the *millions* of houses in Gusteko you could have chosen, you ended up hiding in the same house that Emilia and I are staying in?!" He said witheringly.

Anri blinked and then her face grew flushed as she realized his point. "Subaru. I... I swear to you that I didn't know you were here..."

Subaru snorted. "And what exactly are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for a place to hide!"

"Hide elsewhere!" Subaru said flatly. "Maybe consider under some damp rock!"

Anri bit her lip and drew herself up. "You were dying from the Black Water, Subaru," She said firmly. "I saved your life."

Subaru snorted. "If you were hoping to see me express gratitude for that, you wasted your time! You should have saved a life that actually matters to me!"

Anri looked at Subaru in horrified disbelief.

Subaru flushed, not realizing what he had been about to say until after he'd already said it.

Anri took a deep breath. "You still owe me," She said firmly.

"Owe you?!" Subaru hissed, marching up into Anri's face. She swallowed hard but stood her ground. "I owe you?! I would just as soon peel you like an apple as look at you!" Subaru grabbed her by the throat. Anri struggled helplessly in his grip but with only one arm it was hopeless. "You *abandoned* Emilia when she got sick!"

Anri's eyes widened and she stopped struggling. "What are you talking about?" She choked.

"Emilia got cursed," Subaru grated in Anri's face. "She was cursed by the Black Water!"

Anri blinked. "What?! When? How?!"

Subaru let go of Anri with a sneer of disdain. "I have no idea but she's cursed! Her body is covered with seeping wounds and she's paralyzed from the waist down! Her magic has been sealed and she's encountered two separate lynch mobs this week!" Subaru said, walking away from her, his face like a storm cloud and swearing sulfurously.

Anri rubbed her neck. "I'm sorry, Subaru. I didn't know."

He snorted.

"I swear!" Anri protested. "Ask Emilia if you don't believe me! When we left her at the inn, she was fine!"

Subaru hesitated for a long time. Finally, he looked at Anri with dark eyes. "How *did* you find us?"

"I didn't. I had no idea you were here."

Subaru looked profoundly skeptical but he sighed. "Alright, fine. What made you pick *this* house to hide in?"

Anri hesitated for a second. "I heard... that the people in this house were friendly with my Shadows," She said slowly.

"Your what?"

"My Shadows. Um... they do dirty work for us. Spies, bodyguards, and occasionally assassins."

"Who's us?"

Anri looked pained. "Um. I guess Emilia never mentioned what I told her to you."

"You haven't exactly been a major topic of conversation since you took off," Subaru said sarcastically.

Anri flushed. "My real name is Kairei vas Sirose an Ithil. I'm the Princess of Siros."

Subaru looked at Anri for a long time and then started to laugh. "Of course! Of course, this is just our luck. We run away to a new country and the first fucking person we meet is some kind of noble. What should I have expected?" He shook his head. "Alright, fine. You're a princess. Great. So you're saying that the people who used to live here had a relationship with your... Shadows?"

Anri nodded.

Subaru scratched his chin. "So... was Jessica... was she a Shadow or did she just support them?"

"She was just providing support," Anri answered quickly. "A safe place to stay, a meeting site, things like that."

Subaru's eyes widened. "Right. That makes sense. Working with a jewelry merchant would let the Shadows slip in lots of places by claiming they were delivering cargo. Jewelry is small and easily portable."

"Exactly," Anri nodded. "She was extremely useful in getting our Shadows in and out of towns."

"Well, that explains a lot," Subaru murmured in a mocking calm tone. "Just one question. Who's Jessica?"

Anri blinked.

Subaru glowered at Anri. He stepped forward and Anri stepped back. "I bought this house from a guy named Nicholas. He's a chemist. So that's *two* lies you've already tried to sell me tonight," He growled.

Anri bit her lip and her expression grew trapped. She took a deep breath. "Subaru, I need a place to hide," She said simply.

"And I should care?" He snorted.

"If Emilia is sick, I might be able to cure her. I cured you."

Subaru scowled. "You just lied to me *twice*. Why in the world should I trust you?"

"Because healers are hard to come by and if Emilia is really sick, you have no choice?" Anri said bluntly.

Subaru snarled at her but Anri stood her ground.

Subaru looked away mulling it over.

I don't like this. Everything that Anri has told me since the day we met has been a big pile of BS. But if she healed me then maybe she can heal Emilia...

Or at least she might be able to identify the curse. Once I know what curse I'm dealing with, I can at least hope to find a cure...

Also, whether I like it or not, Anri has a point. I need someone to take care of Emilia. I can't leave her here alone for a whole day while I run out and do other things. And I can't risk taking her with me either.

Anri is really my only options right now. But she's been lying to me and she refuses to tell me the truth. How can I trust her?

Anri seemed to sense that Subaru needed to be reassured. "Subaru, I would never knowingly harm Emilia. I swear it on my brother's life."

Subaru glanced at her. "I didn't even know you had a brother."

Anri pursed her lips. "Well, I do. His name's Gael and I love him very much. I've been taking care of him almost since our parents died. He's very sick and I'm the only one who can convince him to take his medicine. I haven't seen him in months and I don't know if he's OK or where he is or what he's *doing!*" Her voice broke into a shrill cry.

Anri stopped and panting for breath.

Subaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Alright, fine. I believe you have a brother," He admitted.

Anri raised an eyebrow. "If you're really curious, Subaru, just ask anybody. Most people in the kingdom have heard about," Anri paused and her face twisted in disgust. "The Mad Prince of Gusteko," She finished in a grumble.

Subaru thought hard for a long moment. *This sucks. But I have no choice. It's the only option I have. I just need to make sure Anri understands what she's agreed to.*

Subaru glowered at Anri and walked right up to her. Anri raised her chin but she didn't retreat.

"I want you to know something," Subaru said intently. "You just made your brother the collateral to Emilia's safety. If I ever find out that you did *anything* to put Emilia in danger, I *will* go after your brother."

To Subaru's shock, Anri snorted with laughter.

Subaru frowned. "What is it?"

Anri struggled to hide a grin. "Nothing, Subaru. Those are completely acceptable terms. I was... just picturing you trying to fight Gael..."

Subaru led Anri up from the basement.

"Where's Emilia?" She asked.

"Sleeping," He said shorty. "So try to be quiet on your way up."

Anri nodded as they climbed up to the second floor.

Subaru led her to the other bedroom. A slightly smaller but well-furnished room with a pair of beds that had probably belonged to Nicholas's children at some point.

"You can sleep here," He said laconically.

Anri nodded and entered the room and sat down on the bed. She felt her broken arm and winced.

"Subaru," Anri murmured. "Do you think you could help me re-bandage this? I think you might have twisted it when you grabbed me."

Subaru glowered at her for a long moment then finally sighed. He walked over to her and pulled a tiny bottle full of glowing blue liquid out of his pocket. "Hold still," He said as he popped the cork and poured it on Anri's arm.

Anri grabbed her injured arm which tingled and glowed for a moment.

Anri looked up at Subaru in shock as she slowly unbandaged her arm. "It's completely healed!" She whispered.

"You're welcome," Subaru said laconically. "Now be quiet and go to sleep."

"Subaru! How did you-"

"None of your business." Subaru left the room and closed the door behind him.

Anri sat there for a moment and then pulled a small black book out of her satchel and began to flip through it.

The next morning, Subaru woke up but Emilia was still asleep.

Subaru crept out of bed without waking her and left the room.

He glanced at Anri's room but the door was closed. He considered checking on her to make sure that she was still where she should be but decided it would make him look like too much of a creep.

Subaru walked quietly downstairs and began to rummage through the kitchen looking for ideas for breakfast.

Subaru sat at the table, eating an apple, and wondering what to do next.

Anri found us. That means that other people who are looking for us won't be far behind.

I can't be sure how long it will be before someone goes snooping around Nicholas's home looking for him. I don't know if Nicholas told anyone that he was leaving but either way, sooner or later there will be trouble.

If Nicholas did tell people in Stoneybrooke that a stranger appeared and bought his house, the locals will definitely be curious and it's likely someone will think of the 'witch' in the inn and wonder if there's a connection.

If Nicholas didn't bother to tell anyone, then I still have to worry about one of his friends popping by and maybe breaking into the house after they don't see him for a few weeks and worry that something is wrong.

I need to act like Nicholas's house is a limited time resource and that means I need to make as much Vitae as I can. At least it doesn't spoil.

Beyond that, I need to figure out the cure for Emilia's curse, not to mention brewing Azoth for Anima. Those are both going to cost money, a lot of money. Not to mention I need to locate the Stone before I can even get started.

And I still need to find the spirits!

Subaru rubbed his forehead, feeling overwhelmed. He walked into the lab, trying to think.

He took a deep breath. *OK, let's take this one step at a time. You need to make money and locate the spirits. How are you going to do either of those things?*

...What about the smugglers from last night? They said that their boss ran a criminal syndicate, right? Lady Koi, they said? Maybe you could make a deal with her. All kinds of Daphne's potions would be worth a fortune in drug trafficking. Soma is a fine example and it's really cheap and easy to make. If you can make a connection with someone who has an established drug network, making money shouldn't be too hard. And a criminal syndicate certainly has access to information. They could find you some leads to track down Beatrice and Puck.

Except that it won't be that simple.

There's no honor among thieves. If I make contact with these guys, I'm exposed. I might be useful to them at first but they might also view me as a liability once they think they've reaped all the advantage they can from me. Sooner or later, somebody is going to try to sell me out to the kingdom and then Reinhard will come looking. Even if I'm across the border and Reinhard isn't a threat someone will come find me.

Yeah. Subaru Natsuki can't approach the cartel. This is a job for Taiyang.

On the bright side, wiping out all her smugglers in the forest should make this 'Lady Koi' think twice about sending anyone else in there. And rumors of a witch should keep everyone else out.

And that means that Emilia will be safe in there when we're finally ready to vanish into the forest.

Subaru scratched his chin and looked at a nearby bottle of glowing blue liquid the size of a Thermos. *Maybe I should bring a peace offering just in case... Taiyang is a frightening figure but I need to balance that. If I try to make people do what I say by bullying them, I can't turn my back on them for very long and they'll spend all their time trying to figure out a way to get rid of me.*

Offering a bribe or two could help balance that. Taiyang is a terrifying witch of the Old World whom you should never make angry but if you make him happy, the rewards go beyond just money.

Subaru picked up the large vial that held a Decade of life. It felt warm in his hands. *There's nothing that the powerful want more than more life... And there's no one who could pay better for the privilege. Each of these years is precious because it buys Emilia more time but if I need to secure funds for our disappearance... what would people pay for another year of health and life?*

"Good morning, Subaru," Anri said, coming downstairs and stepping into the lab.

Subaru shook free of his reverie. He looked at her darkly. "Good morning," he replied.

"Is Mili still asleep?" She asked, sitting down in a comfortable chair at Nicholas's desk.

"Yeah. She gets pretty tired lately."

"Thanks for... fixing my arm," Anri said awkwardly. "I... forgot to say that last night."

Subaru frowned, noticing that Anri was looking curiously at the blue bottle. He quietly pushed it aside. "You're welcome."

Anri's eyes grew focused. "What are the symptoms of Emilia's curse?"

Subaru thought for a moment. "Weird bleeding letters all over her lower body. She can't walk and her mana is sealed."

Anri's eyes widened. "That sounds like a potent curse."

Subaru made a face. "Do you think that the medicine you made for me would help?"

Anri shook her head. "I don't think so, Subaru," She admitted. "That medicine works against a very specific curse. I... have reason to suspect it wouldn't be effective here. And I don't have the ingredients to make more of it anyway."

Subaru sighed.

"Subaru," Anri murmured. "While we have a moment, I need to talk to you about something."

"What?"

"I need your help."

Subaru glared at her. "In case you've missed this, Anri, I have my own problems," He said coldly.

"Well... maybe I could help you with those," Anri suggested. "Siros will certainly have healers who can treat powerful curses. I can order them to help you if you could help me get back home."

Subaru hesitated. *That's... actually not a bad offer. I can certainly get Anri home.*

Actually, wait a minute. Why can't she get home on her own? What isn't she telling me?

Subaru looked at Anri suspiciously. "OK, Anri. Spill it. What's going on with you?"

Anri was silent for a long time. Finally, she sighed. "Subaru, as you've probably figured out, I'm in an awful lot of trouble."

"Because of Elsa coming after you?"

"That's part of it but it's not the biggest issue."

Subaru snorted. "And here I thought that I was the only bonehead in the world who thought of people trying to hunt me down and kill me as one of the 'minor' problems."

"Welcome to the club," Anri said dryly. She sighed. "Subaru, my homeland is under attack. There's an army besieging our lands. And I've also heard that a second army is going to be sent against Siros in a matter of weeks. There's just no way that we can hold back that many people. And from what I've heard, we're running desperately low on supplies as well..."

Subaru thought for a moment. *Oh. That must be what those soldiers at Kocytos were talking about. I'd almost forgotten about that.*

Ultimately, he sighed. "I'm very sorry," Subaru said sincerely.

"If you'll help me, I can help you," Anri said seriously. "I know a brilliant healer in Siros who's written lots of books about removing curses. If you can break the siege and help me get home, I'll personally order her to make treating Emilia her top priority."

"Right," Subaru said skeptically.

Anri glared at him. She took a deep breath. "I can also help you find *the red stone*," She said meaningfully.

Subaru's jaw dropped. Images of the Philosopher's Stone in Daphne's lab flashed before his eyes.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

What is happening here? How could Anri possibly know about the Philosopher's Stone, much less that you were seeking it? Even Emilia doesn't know about it!

Still, assuming that Anri is being truthful, this is an opportunity that can not be overstated. With the Philosopher's Stone, curing Emilia's curse and restoring all of her stolen memories would be trivial. Once the world knows who you really are, you can simply walk back into Lagunica, take the spirits back and vanish.

Not to mention that the stone facilitates the production of large amounts of Vitae. With the Stone you won't be limited to refining a year or two at a time. Whole decades can be extracted from suddenly ended lives. What better way to finance you and Emilia's lives together? Men would pay mountains of gold to prolong their lives. Each life you steal might buy you years of luxury...

Subaru started, unsettled by the cold thoughts but *Reason and Judgment's* powerful calm soon absorbed him again.

All the same, the question of how Anri knows about the Stone can not be ignored. She's constantly been lying and keeping secrets from you. Powerful secrets as well. These must be investigated.

Perhaps questioning her on the subject will provide further insight. At least you can confirm if she really knows about the stone or if she just randomly guessed. No matter how unlikely that might be.

Subaru left *Reason and Judgment*.

"What red stone?" Subaru said, his eyes narrowing.

Anri smirked. "Oh, I think you know very well."

"Well, why don't you *tell* me?" Subaru whispered. "Then you can be *sure* I know."

Anri bit her lip and hesitated for a long time. "The red stone is gone," She said finally. "But I can tell you where to find the black stone."

Subaru frowned in real confusion this time. "What 'black stone?'" He asked.

Anri hesitated. "The black stone. The... King's Gift," She said uncertainly.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Curiouser and Curiouser. Anri knows about "the King's Gift." That at least establishes that she is referring to the Philosopher's Stone. There's no way that she guessed that name at random.

She claims the Philosopher's Stone is gone? Perhaps after being unutilized for four hundred years, it decayed back into the King's Gift again. That's admittedly a loss but not a serious one. It took Daphne decades to craft the King's Gift. But if the King's Gift survives intact then refining it into a true Philosopher's Stone would take a matter of days. According to Daphne's memories, all you need to do is to infuse it with six strands of refined and purified mana and then subsume it in an alloy of the four noble metals. Trivial.

All the same, don't lose track of the larger question. How does Anri know these things about you? Knowledge is power and Anri clearly has great knowledge of you.

Anri wielding power over you is an... uncomfortable thought. She is a royal by birth and she's been born and bred to calculate the value of others' lives by a single metric: personal power. Remember she's already forsaken Emilia once for her own benefit...

Still keeping her close until you unravel this riddle may be prudent. She will cause less trouble if she knows that you're watching her. And while her interests are not Emilia's interests, there appears to be no sign that she means Emilia any explicit harm so you don't need to fear leaving her here to watch Emilia. And her offer of providing a healer in exchange for your assistance is mutually beneficial at least.

Subaru restarted time.

"Anri," Subaru said seriously. "What do you want? What are you asking for in exchange?" He said in a guarded voice.

"Help me to save my people," Anri said earnestly. "Help us win this war."

Subaru stared at her. "*What?!*"

"Subaru, you fought off a Snow Blight," Anri said excitedly. "And you defeated the Black Water! I'd need an army to even *hope* to do either of those things! If you'd help me, we might have a chance!"

Subaru shook his head in disbelief. "Anri, I..." Words failed him.

This girl is crazy! I can't win a war for her!

Of course you can, A cold voice whispered from the depths of his mind. You can easily win a war and you should never think anything different. It is true that you alone cannot win a battle. But it is only fools who believe that wars are decided on the battlefield. Battles are fought on the field of battle. But wars are waged in all the those dark, empty spaces between battles. It is not soldiers who win wars but societies. Wars are moved and turned by a thousand tiny hands and it is those tiny hands that are the prize.

Wars are not fought to win more swords. One does not conquer to gain soldiers. It is the ordinary people, the industry and the resources that they represent, these are the

rewards that make conquest sweet.

Only a fool or a madman burns a kingdom down and then proudly declares their reign over the ash. To plunder, to slaughter, to steal, these are the things that such fools name 'conquest' and where a barren desolation is created, they name it 'victory.'

Victory, conquest, empire; such things never depend on dead enemies. They might require that some enemies die but to simply slaughter all your foes will not secure these things.

This is the difference between strategy and tactics and the masterful commander reigns unchallenged over both these worlds. Attack your foe's assets and forces in the dark, lonely places that they have not even thought to protect and their great armies will crumble into powder, all unused.

Subaru shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. *I wonder where all those thoughts came from... Maybe I'm using Reason and Judgment too much today.*

Although they do make a few good points...

Subaru sighed as he sank down into a across from Anri. "Anri, tell me everything you know about your enemy."

"We might be here for a while," Anri warned him.

Subaru shrugged gestured at the enormous chemical apparatus on the lab table. "I'm not going anywhere at the moment."

Anri took a deep breath. "My enemy is House Griest. They rule over the province of Sanshi. That's the biggest province in Gusteko by a goodly amount. It even has two real cities in it: Sanshi and Kocytos. It has the most people and the largest armies by far."

"OK, so why do these guys hate you so much?"

"Hating Siros is almost traditional in Gusteko at this point," Anri sighed. "For centuries, we were considered a House accursed until my parents' time. The bigger problem is that Griest thinks that we're costing them money."

"How?"

"During my mother's reign, we finished cutting a pass through the mountains into Kararagi. We'd been cutting it for generations but now merchants from Kararagi and western Lagunica can come north through Siros lands instead of always paying Sanshi tariffs. That's costing Griest a lot of money."

"All the traders had to come through Sanshi before?" Subaru asked.

Anri nodded. "Pretty much. There were a few other routes through the mountains but they were all difficult and dangerous and damn near impossible to traverse except in the middle of summer. So in practice, all trade went through Sanshi. Now Griest is trying to rally the other houses to crush us by claiming that we're compromising Gusteko purity."

"I don't think I followed that," Subaru admitted.

Anri rolled her eyes. "You didn't follow it because it doesn't make much sense. You see, most of Gusteko's populace are xenophobic reactionaries. They don't like foreigners and they *really* don't like demi-humans. Kararagi merchants tend to be demi-human so they stick out like a sore thumb in the north. Griest is claiming that by allowing easy access to Gusteko from Kararagi, we're compromising Gusteko's racial purity."

Subaru made a disgusted face, remembering the villagers who had threatened Emilia's life.

Anri nodded. "Yeah, I feel the same way," She agreed. "Sanshi is the most bigoted province in the north. They don't even treat human foreigners very well and demi-humans who try to travel in Sanshi lands have been known to be attacked by mobs and even lynched. Most merchants won't be willing to go through Sanshi lands once they have a choice so Griest is really worried about the new competition."

Subaru mulled that over. "Anri," He said slowly. "If Gusteko is really that xenophobic, will you get in trouble if I help you win your war?" *Always assuming that I can*, Subaru added wearily.

Anri sighed. "It's a real possibility," She admitted. "If Griest is defeated because of your help, the other Houses could denounce me as a traitor. But for that to be a problem, my people have to survive long enough to even *worry* about it!"

Subaru nodded. *Fair point but maybe I should keep that in the back of my mind...*

"So Griest is the most powerful House?" Subaru asked.

"By a large margin. They actually used to be the royalty of Gusteko. This was centuries ago before their bad decisions got them deposed. They still claim to be the guardians and protectors of Gusteko but it's debatable how seriously people take that."

"What are they supposed to be protecting it from?"

Anri screwed up her face and thought hard for a moment. "Foreigners, I guess?" Anri replied, scratching her head. "They are the most accessible and southernmost province so they do form a barrier against southern incursions. And they claim to have come to power after protecting Gusteko from an evil witch."

"A witch?" Subaru said sharply, remembering the festival in Kocytos the other night.

Anri shrugged. "It's an old legend. I have no idea if it's true. House Griest claim that their ancestor took the crown after they destroyed an evil witch who ruled over the region in the days leading up to the Great Cataclysm."

Subaru frowned and thought hard for a minute. "What do you know about that witch?"

"Not much honestly," Anri said. "I'm not even sure if the story is true. If it happened, it would have been right around the time of the Great Cataclysm and we weren't taking very careful notes around then."

Subaru sighed.

"The story goes," Anri continued. "That in the waning days of the Old Kingdom, the north was ruled by a Witch named Carmila. She was said to be indescribably beautiful and unimaginably cruel. She was said to wander the lands demanding that everyone worship her. She delighted in trapping men and women with her beauty. They say that once you saw Carmila, you were never able to think about anything else but her. House Griest claims that they captured Carmila and burned her at the stake for her crimes."

Subaru shuddered, imagining that fate befalling Emilia.

"Like I said," Anri added. "It's just an old legend. But they do believe it in Sanshi. They have a festival in Kocytos every year to commemorate burning the witch."

"Yeah. I saw it," Subaru growled. He frowned and glowered off into the distance.

Subaru shook off his bad memories of the festival. "Alright, Anri," Subaru said. "Tell me everything you know about the Sanshi forces."

Anri thought for a moment and then pulled a rolled-up piece of paper out of her satchel. She spread it out on the desk beside her. Subaru inspected it. It was a detailed map of Gusteko. "So the Sanshi army is located right about here," Anri pointed at a spot just outside of the city of Siros. "They haven't been able to completely surround the city but

they're still holding us under siege and preventing any traders from being willing to come resupply us. They came marching up the mountains with a mob of terrified peasants flying in front of them."

"What do you mean?"

Anri's face was grim. "The army was killing everyone they came across."

"*What?!*" Subaru shouted. "That's just dumb! The peasants have nothing to do with a war between cities! You don't kill the peasantry in an invasion, they're an asset! If you kill the peasants, who will grow your food? Even if you conquer the city, without people to work the fields and the mines, all you've won is empty land!"

Wait. Where did I hear that?

Anri shrugged. "I don't know why they're doing it, Subaru. I'm not aware of any Gusteko army that ever deliberately tried to wipe out the peasantry in a war but in this case it doesn't seem to matter to Malcolm an Griest. His armies drove a horde of peasants into Siros who were desperately looking for safety."

Subaru frowned. "Maybe that's what he wants," Subaru mused. "With the city jammed full of refugees, the food won't last very long and neither will the siege."

Anri looked sick. "That's a brutal way to make war, Subaru."

"I can personally assure you, Anri," Subaru said, rubbing his forehead. "There aren't many pleasant ways."

What's wrong with me? My head feels... funny...

I don't know why but talking about war and conquest is making me feel... excited...

That's never happened before.

"How big is the army at Siros?" Subaru asked.

"About twenty thousand men."

Subaru looked at Anri incredulously.

Anri shrugged helplessly.

Subaru sighed. "Alright. Twenty fucking thousand. Why not? How big is the Siros army inside the city?"

"About ten thousand," Anri muttered.

Subaru pinched the bridge of his nose. "So you're outnumbered about two to one and you're already under siege..."

This city is dead...

Anri sighed. "It's... actually worse than you think, Subaru."

"It can get *worse?!*"

Anri pointed toward a second city in the Sanshi province. The city was labeled 'Kocytos.' "House Griest is gathering a second column at Kocytos and it's scheduled to march within a few days. That's expected to be another ten thousand men."

"How the hell does Griest have such so many more soldiers than you?" Subaru demanded.

Anri shrugged. "Sanshi province is a lot bigger than Siros and they're the only province that has two cities besides. They just... have a lot of people. But not all of the army is

Griest's in this case."

"What do you mean?"

Anri pointed back at the first army. "Only about half of the soldiers here are technically from Sanshi. The rest are assorted mercenaries."

Subaru's mind latched onto that. "So a full *half* of the army is mercenaries?"

Anri sniffed. "Mostly recruited from Lagunica and Vollachia. Griest has been hiring every foreign mercenary he could get his hands on. It's actually pretty open-minded for a guy whose major objection to Siros is based on xenophobia," She added sarcastically.

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Training, equipment, and tenacity constitute the first triad of victory, a cold voice mused. Well-trained and well-equipped soldiers, when properly motivated and inspired by the cause, are capable of defeating much larger opposing forces than simple mathematics would suggest.

Mercenaries as a group excel at the first two points but fail on the third. Mercenaries make exceptional warriors but often poor soldiers. They're built for battle, not for a campaign. Their training and equipment is often top-notch but their loyalty to the cause goes no deeper than their purse.

And their natural independence means that it requires an experienced commander to break them to harness. If the commander fails to establish his authority over the Johnnies then those irregulars can be as much of a danger to the mission as they are a boon. A ship with two captains is likely to wind up on the rocks. House Griest believes that they have strengthened their forces considerably at the cost of emptying their treasury by hiring all of these mercenaries but they have also introduced a fault line into their own forces.

Fault lines can be exploited to break the enemy apart.

Subaru stepped out of *Reason and Judgment*.

Subaru blinked. *Wait. Where did I hear any of that? What do I know about mercenaries, armies, or military tactics? If I never heard it then Reason and Judgment can't repeat it? Right?*

Subaru considered slipping back into *Reason and Judgment* to further analyze it but for the moment he decided that the source of the information was irrelevant as long as it was accurate.

"What kind of equipment does the army have?" Subaru asked.

"Equipment?"

"Like... how do they fight? What kinds of weapons? Are they mounted or foot soldiers? Do they have siege equipment?" Subaru clarified.

"They have catapults but they hadn't been using them very much," Anri replied. "Once they ran out of things to throw at us in the immediate area they seemed to decide that dragging more rocks up the mountains to throw at us was a waste of effort. They've just dug in and are waiting to starve Siros out. They have a wide variety of weapons since a lot of the soldiers are from different places. They have swords, spears, and arrows for example. They have a few riding dragons but nothing that could be described as a cavalry unit."

Subaru absorbed that for a moment. "Alright. So, I doubt that they can live off the land this far up into the mountains, especially this early in the year."

Anri nodded. "They're heavily dependent on supply wagons. They get about twenty a day."

Subaru's jaw dropped. "*Twenty a day?!"*

Anri nodded. "We've counted."

Subaru frowned. *There's something important here.*

He triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

Three pounds of food per head per day is standard fare for a soldier, A voice said with authority. Twenty thousand men means sixty thousand pounds of food every single day. Assuming that each wagon has a standard three thousand pound carrying capacity, twenty wagons is about the minimum required to supply their daily needs and that's not even considering other necessities. Equipment and gear wears out. They also need medicine, clothing, blankets, new weapons and armor, and a thousand other things. All of this suggests that their supplies are thin. They're not getting more supplies than they need, they're probably getting just barely what they need to sustain them and some days, probably less than that.

Their stores must be depleting...

But there's a deeper meaning here.

Logistics is the heart of any army. Victory and defeat in battle are dependent on tactics, discipline, and personal courage. But victory and defeat in war is a contest of logistical support and resources. Fully half of the army at Siros are mercenaries. These men, by definition, can not have anything resembling a formal supply chain. They're going to be heavily dependent on the Sanshi regulars to provide logistical support. And you shouldn't doubt that both factions of this army resent the other fervently.

If any disruption in this arrangement came up, it's not unthinkable that this resentment might boil up into open conflict...

You'd still need to deal with the second army but you did hear some valuable intel from those soldiers at Kocytos. You just need to find a means to take advantage of it.

Subaru left *Reason and Judgment*. He pinched the bridge of his nose. *OK. It sounds like Reason and Judgment is onto something. I really hope that it knows what it's talking about and all this information isn't just plumbed from assorted video games that I was dumb enough to take seriously.*

"How long is the trip from Sanshi to Siros?" Subaru asked, tracing the road.

"For a wagon? Probably about a week each way," Anri answered.

Subaru squinted at the map. "It doesn't really look all that far," Subaru objected.

Anri smirked. "That's because your map is flat, Subaru. Gusteko is very mountainous. For a riding dragon, the trip isn't too bad. You could probably make it in a day if you push it. But a wagon needs to be hauled up and down those narrow, twisting mountain roads. And don't forget, the dragons pulling the wagons need to be rested every two hours. I've lived in this area my whole life. It would take a week. Trust me."

Subaru nodded, a plan coming together in his mind. "Then all we have to do is stop the supply lines and that army should break down," Subaru murmured.

Anri rocked her hand back and forth. "It's not a bad idea but it's not as easy as you make it sound. Sanshi isn't stupid enough to send the wagons unescorted. They won't have a *huge* number of soldiers with them but they'll have enough to scare off common bandits. I don't pretend to understand your power, Subaru but you should know that you'd be seriously outnumbered."

Subaru pursed his lips. *Maybe. But I could always head back to the forest and gather up a small army. A few dozen mabeasts would probably even the odds considerably.*

I hope. Actually, I'm not sure if I can count on them evening the odds. Mabeasts like Guiltylowe are powerful fighters. But they're going to be better at ripping up peasants and ordinary soldiers than anything else. If any of these guards are elites on the same level as Garfiel or Elsa then the mabeasts will be out of their league.

I'll need to think about this. But it might be the best way to slow down the Sanshi conquest of Siros.

Not to mention the years you would obtain, A cold voice observed. *It's a bloody business but just remember, every life you steal gives Emilia another day...*

Emilia's life and safety should be your only concern...

Subaru felt for a moment and then pressed forward. "You said that you needed supplies, right? What kind of supplies does Siros need?"

Anri pulled a letter out of her pocket and handed it to Subaru. "Vera gave me this," She said.

Subaru scanned it. It appeared to be a shipping order that Anri had signed, specifying how many goods were to be delivered and at what price, which was highly inflated from what Subaru would have expected. "Food, medicine, weapons... Damn, you guys are running short of just about everything, aren't you?"

Anri bowed her head. "Like I said... we're desperate. You can keep that order, if you want."

Subaru nodded and tucked it into a pocket.

If this is accurate then Anri's friends in Siros are likely just this side of starving...

Subaru scratched his chin. "If we only had a way to locate merchants who'd be willing to ship goods through a warzone," He mused. "Hey, Anri? Siros can pay for goods, right? I mean, we don't need to worry about finding merchants willing to ship goods on credit, do we?"

Anri looked offended. "House Ithil is very wealthy, Subaru! We're not looking for charity!"

Subaru raised his hands defensively. "OK, OK!" Subaru shouted back. "Sorry I asked!"

Anri snorted.

Subaru made a face. *Of course, even if the money is good, I still need to find people willing to run shipments through an enemy army...*

"Anri," Subaru muttered. "I need to buy more ingredients to make medicine for Emilia. Do you know anyplace I might be able to find them?"

Anri looked awkward. "Well, getting to Siros isn't a realistic option yet. So I'd say you should either go to Kocytos or Ganaks." She pointed at the map. "I think I'd start with Kocytos. It's closer."

He sighed. "Thanks but I already went there. It didn't go well and they didn't have what I needed anyway."

Anri made a face. "Then I guess you're next best bet is Ganaks but that's a long way off."

Subaru made a face. *Maybe if I contact the smugglers they could sell me some? Or I could steal it. Either way works.*

"I'll start making breakfast," Anri offered.

Anri whipped up some porridge that she found in the cabinet.

Subaru hadn't even recognized the bag as human food. He'd thought it might have been bird seed.

"OK, Subaru," Anri announced. "The food's ready."

Subaru nodded. "Great. Put some in a bowl and I'll bring it up to Emilia."

"Wait. Why don't we bring Emilia down here? Let's put her in the sitting room."

Subaru frowned. "Why?"

"Because sitting in bed all day isn't good for her. We'll need to worry about muscle atrophy and bed sores. Also it's got to be boring up there. Let's give Emilia a change of scenery."

For a moment, Subaru was tempted to refuse out of sheer contrariness but then he sighed. "Alright."

Subaru walked up stairs and found Emilia awake. She lay in bed, staring at the wall with a morose expression.

Subaru put a cheerful smile on his face. "Morning, Mili!"

Emilia regarded him gravely. "Morning, Subaru," She murmured.

Subaru choose a different tactic. "So, Mili. Do you feel up to some company today?" Subaru asked, helping her to sit up.

"Company?" She frowned.

"Yeah. Seems Anri decided to come back," Subaru said, unable to completely suppress the growl from his voice.

Emilia's face lit up. "Anri's back?!"

Subaru swallowed a surge of jealousy. "Yeah. She came here last night. She's downstairs and we're holding breakfast for you."

"That's wonderful!" Emilia said, looking happy for the first time in days.

Emilia wrapped her arms around Subaru's neck and let him pick her up. Subaru wrapped her in a blanket to keep her warm and Emilia laid her head on his shoulder.

Subaru carried her carefully down the stairs.

Anri had placed three bowls of porridge on a coffee-table in the sitting room.

Emilia lifted her head off Subaru's shoulder and her face brightened. "Anri!"

Anri broke into a broad smile. "Emilia!" She cried.

Subaru felt another surge of jealousy that he suppressed. "Yeah, the gang's all here," He muttered. "Let's eat."

He carried Emilia into the sitting room. The sitting room was a comfortable if somewhat shabby area with several soft couches and a few cushioned chairs.

Subaru gently laid her on the couch in front of the coffee-table. Subaru sat down beside her while Anri sat on the floor.

They all started eating.

"So, Anri," Emilia said cheerfully. "How have you been?"

Anri's face fell. "Not so good, actually," She admitted. "Vera, Victoire, and I tried to get back to Siros but we were attacked by a Sanshi patrol. They drew them away and I... ran," She finished in a small voice.

"I'm so sorry," Emilia whispered.

Anri sighed. "Why can't I ever do anything useful?" She wondered in a querulous voice as she sipped her porridge.

"I so understand how you feel..." Emilia patted Anri's hand sympathetically and gave Subaru a meaningful look.

Subaru's jaw dropped. *Emilia's asking me to leave?!*

Subaru slowly closed his mouth and picked up his empty bowl of porridge. "I need to go check on the medicine brewing," He growled, not caring about sounding convincing. "I'll be back... later."

Subaru walked out of the room. He went to the lab, grumbling and swearing to himself.

"It sounds like you've had a really tough time," Emilia said sympathetically.

Anri nodded. "Yeah but I think you've had it worse."

Emilia sighed. "It's been... difficult."

"Mili," Anri said faltering. "I'm so *very* sorry. I... I thought that you'd be safer if Vera, Victoire, and I left you alone. I never dreamed that you would get sick after I left..."

"It's not your fault, Anri," Emilia smiled. "You don't have anything to apologize for. Nobody blames you."

Anri sighed. "Subaru does."

Emilia hesitated. "Well... that's not fair," Emilia said firmly. "That's just... Subaru being Subaru," She explained. "I'll talk to him about it."

Anri shook her head. "Emilia, what happened to you?"

She sighed. "I honestly don't know. I felt fine when you left. And then a few hours later, I had black marks all over my legs and was running a high fever."

"Can I see?" Anri asked.

Emilia nodded and Anri unwrapped the blankets from around Emilia.

Anri blinked in surprise to discover that Emilia was naked except for a thin shift. "Subaru didn't help you get dressed before he brought you down?" She asked incredulously.

Emilia shrugged. "My clothes got... messy the other day," She said evasively, "It's not like I'm going anywhere. I suppose it doesn't matter what I wear right now."

Anri shook her head. "Men," She grumbled. "This is why guys make shitty caretakers. They never seem to think of the most obvious things. I'll find you some clothes, Mili. I think I saw some dresses upstairs. You're temporarily handicapped, not a baby that needs to be swaddled."

Emilia sighed. "Subaru has my dress. He washed it yesterday and I think he hung it up to dry," Emilia told her.

Anri inspected Emilia's legs and her eyes widened. "Mili, what *are* these?!" She stared at the strange wounds that ran up Emilia's lower body like strange black and red tattoos.

"I don't know," Emilia replied. "Subaru thinks that they're cursed wounds. Do you know how to treat them?"

Anri shook her head. "I have never seen anything like these. I'd need to check the books in the Grand Archives for suggestions. I'm sorry, Mili. I have no idea how to cure this."

Emilia shook her head. "It's alright, Anri. Subaru's working hard to make me medicine while we figure it out."

Anri frowned and bundled Emilia up again. "Well, for right now, let's keep you warm. I'm going to go find you some clothes, Mili. I'll be back in a minute."

A few hours later, Subaru emerged from the lab. He'd spent the morning and part of the afternoon in thought, deciding what to do next.

"Hey, Mili," Subaru said, sitting down beside her on the sofa. Anri was sitting on the other side.

Anri had found Emilia a frilly purple dress to change into and Emilia had laid her blankets aside. The dress didn't fit her very well and it kept slipping down one shoulder but Emilia seemed in much better spirits now.

"Hi, Subaru," Emilia said with a smile. "Maybe later you could carry me to the kitchen and I can help you and Anri make dinner?"

"That sounds like fun," Anri commented.

Subaru sighed. "Actually, Mili. I wanted to know if you would be OK alone for a while. I have an idea about how I could find more medicine for you but I might be gone until late tonight."

"I won't be here alone, Subaru," Emilia said. "I have Anri to keep me company."

"I can get Emilia whatever she needs and I can help her get to the restroom," Anri agreed.

Subaru did not look terribly reassured. "Take good care of her," Subaru warned Anri.

Emilia frowned. "Subaru!" She protested.

"I will," Anri promised.

Subaru sighed and turned back to his wife. "Mili, is... is there anything I could get you while I'm out?" He asked plaintively. "Like some new books or a puzzle? Something that would keep your mind occupied while you're recovering?"

Emilia gave him a somber smile. "Subaru, I think we have bigger things to worry about."

"I *never* have anything bigger to worry about than your happiness," Subaru disagreed.

Emilia smiled and hugged him.

That afternoon, Subaru rode into the Elio Forest.

OK. I need to get money, find the spirits, and possibly try to help Anri... if I feel like it.

All of those goals might have a common solution: Lady Koi.

A crime boss can probably help me do all these things so I'll start by finding her and see what problems she can solve for me in exchange for me not crushing her head.

I also brought a Decade with me just in case I need to bribe people.

I have no idea where to find her but maybe if I poke around in that smuggler camp, I'll find a clue.

Subaru rode through the smuggler camp again. The bodies were covered under a thin layer of snow. The clearing was dyed a faint pink from the blood mixing with the white ice.

Nothing in the camp had been touched and the mabeasts were long gone.

Subaru dismounted. He walked over to the carts and began to rummage through them. Subaru found a cart that was full of food, something that confused him.

We definitely need food so finding this is a godsend. And it will keep for a while in the cold of the forest. But there's no way that these guys went through all this effort to smuggle fruits and vegetables into Gusteko.

Subaru whistled for Patrasche.

The dragon came to her master's side.

Subaru quickly stuffed the dragon's saddlebags with whatever food would fit. Then he kept poking around in the cart until he found a false bottom.

Bingo.

He opened it and discovered a pile of refined metals.

Not precious metals, Subaru mused. These are standard goods being shipped through the forest just to avoid paying tariffs. I know that Gusteko tariffs are supposed to be insane but I'm surprised that smuggling things like steel and tin is even cost effective.

Subaru searched through the other carts. One contained a small cache of uncut gems but they didn't appear to be of any great value.

Why are they smuggling this garbage? Subaru wondered to himself. He thought for a moment. *I think one of the smugglers said this was a 'trial run' to see if the forest was safe to smuggle goods through. Good thing I answered that question with a negative.*

They're probably smuggling junk just so that if this attempt went south they wouldn't lose anything.

Another cart had a few bags of white powder hidden inside.

Stregno root, Subaru recognized it. Daphne's cultists used that drug although they considered it to be a poor-caliber stimulant. I'm surprised they can sell it. Then again, maybe it's just the best drug that's out there these days.

Ironically, Subaru found the fake goods much more valuable than the smuggled goods that they had been packed on top of. He now had enough food for several days and Subaru found a large number of thick warm blankets in another cart. He quickly grabbed as many blankets as he could.

Unfortunately, there's nothing here that tells me where their base is. Not that it's a surprise. Any competent smuggler won't leave clues to his base of operations. I could

go through the smugglers' pockets but that would be messy and I'm pretty sure I'd still come up empty-handed.

Subaru frowned. *OK. Here's an idea. What if I tried to follow their tracks? These carts would leave some pretty clear tracks through the forest, especially if I use Reason and Judgment to follow them. Maybe I can find out where these smugglers came from. If I trace them back to their point of origin, maybe I'll find somebody I can question.*

Subaru scratched his chin. *It's still only mid afternoon. And Anri is watching Emilia. I can spend a few hours trying to make this work.*

It was harder than he'd thought it would be to follow the trail, even using *Reason and Judgment*. The tracks were easily visible in the deep snow but once he'd emerged from the forest, the springy grass on the fields contained barely a trace. He'd taken wrong turns several times but as the sun began to set, Subaru found himself at an enormous tavern set along a major highway in northern Lagunica.

Subaru rode Patrasche in a big circle around the building.

The tracks start from the stable, Subaru mused. But there's no sign of the carts coming into the stable. Granted, there's a lot of traffic on this muddy road so the tracks might be masked but the six carts have a pretty distinct pattern. I should be able to see some sign of them arriving. That tells me that either they spent at least a day or two here or that this is their point of origin.

Seems odd to put hand-drawn carts in a stable. But I guess that's one way to keep them out of the rain if the cargo is valuable.

Subaru rode Patrasche into the enormous stable and dismounted.

He looked around. The place was like a cross between a stable and a garage. There were not only dozens of earth dragons in attendance but several full sized wagons were being repaired and maintained inside as well. A lanky teenage boy was shoveling dragon shit out of a stall.

"Help you, sir?" The teen asked politely.

"Maybe. Did six hand-drawn carts leave here yesterday?"

"No," The teen said immediately.

Subaru scratched his chin. He glanced at a group of hand-drawn carts that sat against the wall and were of the exact same design as the ones in the forest. Six slots next to them were conspicuously empty.

The teen followed Subaru's gaze and flushed slightly.

"So," Subaru said calmly. "You were working here yesterday?"

"Yes," The teen admitted. "Look, all of those carts have been gone for weeks. Whatever carts you found, they didn't come from here."

"Oh," Subaru murmured. "That's disappointing."

"Yeah. Well, if you'll excuse me, I have some things to take care of," The teen dropped his shovel and left the stable to head into the tavern, giving Subaru several long nervous looks over his shoulder.

"Hm," Subaru said to Patrasche. "Well, I guess we've found the place. Hang loose for a few. OK, girl?"

If Bali had ever had a last name, he'd long since forgotten it. Most people didn't even know his first name. As far as everyone was concerned, he was just Whistler. He's gotten that nickname because of the pronounced lisp that he spoke with, courtesy of his enormous buckteeth.

Ratkin demi-humans are considered some of the lowest of the low on the continent. They rarely topped four feet and their lanky bodies are considered too weak to do any serious manual labor. Worse, ratkin have huge litters of children and they always seem to be perpetually pregnant, producing litter after litter of children that they can't feed. This was enough to convince most of the other races that ratkins were just a step above the vermin that they resembled.

When Whistler had been a boy in Girali on the western edge of Kararagi, there had been a proposal to start raising and slaughtering young ratkin for meat. The proposal was quickly voted down by the assembly of Kararagi City-States. Nobody had been quite sure if the proposal had been serious or simply intended as satire. Either way, the fact that the proposal was even debated at all had been fairly horrifying to the demi-human community at large.

Whistler had grown up with dozens of brothers and sisters that he knew about and he was fairly certain that his mother had kept right on producing more of them after he'd left. The family's food situation was precarious at best. Only the youngest children would have food with any kind of regularity so when Bali's stomach rumbled hard enough, he had walked away from home at the age of two. At that age, a ratkin was still not quite full grown but Whistler had gone out seeking fame, fortune, and food.

Initially, things had not gone well for him. Whistler continued to eat out of garbage cans in Kararagi but at least now he wasn't trying to help feed an entire brood of children. Life on the streets of Girali was hard but the slave traders usually didn't bother trying to capture ratkin so he was better off than some. Ratkin could fit into tight places but they were still too weak to work in the mines.

Whistler's life had been changed forever the day that he had met Lady Koi. Koi was a beautiful kitsune demi-human, then newly involved in the Black Silver Coins. The Coins were a welcoming organization to demi-humans but they were distinctly prejudiced against women. Women rarely achieved any authority in the Coins except possibly as the proprietors of brothels since the Coins were pragmatic enough to admit that bosses should have *some* experience in the businesses they managed.

Koi had already endured several attempts to push her out of the coins and Bali could tell that she was going places. He offered himself at her service, to do whatever she required. Her companions had laughed but Koi appeared intrigued by his potential as a spy and informer. Whistler's life had been wretched from the get-go and he only expected things to get worse. So risking his life on Koi's say-so wasn't so bad as long as he got a good meal out of it.

Whistler had become one of Koi's agents, working as a spy and an infiltrator for her. Whistler had no illusions about his position in the grand scheme of things. He was too small and weak to be useful in a fight and too dumb to be useful anywhere else but he had big ears and he was a good listener. Koi believed that information was power and Whistler was very good at acquiring information.

Now, Koi had real power. Koi had taken over the smuggler's wing of the Black Silver Coins in a coup almost ten years ago and she had divided her attention between smuggling goods and acquiring information. Many questioned the point of this but Koi knew that good intelligence was the different between getting a shipment over a border easily and running headfirst into a patrol. As a result of Koi's visionary leadership, the formerly tiny smuggler branch had become wealthy and prosperous, even growing large enough to contend with the security branch, the drug branch, and the prostitution branch of the Black Silver Coins directly. Whistler heard rumors that a few of the other branches were gathering their forces, intending to put Koi in her place.

Whistler was beyond caring. Whistler, at the ripe old age of twenty three, was a widower and a grandfather many times over. He knew that he was approaching the end of his life. Few ratkin ever saw thirty and then only as weak and dependent creatures. He was seeking a more interesting way to end his life.

Whistler would have eagerly done more of Koi's bidding for a reward since he felt that he had so little left to lose at his age but he was well aware that Koi had become too big of a fish to concern herself with the likes of him anymore.

However, Koi didn't forget him altogether and she had given him a job tending bar at a front for the Black Silver Coins. It was a place that was useful for her agents because the members of the Coins and their associates tended to gather there to exchange information and collaborate on their jobs. Whistler still had good ears and he put them to good use, reporting to Koi and her lieutenants about things that they would be interested in.

Whistler spent most of his time standing *on* the bar while he poured drinks for his patrons. He was simply too short to reach it otherwise. Whistler made a comfortable living here by ratkin standards and he kept an eye on the place for Lady Koi.

Life wasn't half bad.

It had been a quiet, uneventful evening when Toby the stable-boy came in.

Toby's boots were covered in dragon dung and Whistler started to reprimand him for tracking the disgusting muck across his nice clean floor until he saw the look on the kid's face.

Toby quickly whispered to Whistler about a stranger who had appeared, asking questions about the caravan that left yesterday.

A moment later, Toby froze and he attempted to discretely point at the door.

Whistler rolled his eyes. Toby's attempts at nonchalance had never fooled anyone.

Whistler glanced at the door and saw a stranger standing there in a hooded gray robe.

Everyone in the bar noticed him immediately. The bar's regular patrons were all well known to each other. Everyone here worked in various branches of the Coins and outsiders weren't welcome in the bar. If any traveler was stupid enough to stop for a meal, they'd be served bad beer and rancid food until they departed. And if that was ineffective, then a 'spontaneous' bar brawl would quickly break out and the strangers would be injured in the scuffle to give them more encouragement to leave and never come back.

Whistler gestured with his head and Toby slipped back out into the stables.

The tavern patrons kept talking and playing cards at their tables but it was hard to ignore how many people were looking at the stranger darkly.

The hooded stranger didn't even seem to notice. He walked up to the bar and sat down. The only other person sitting at the bar was Alric, a mountain of a man who worked for Zeno's security forces and did some side-work as Whistler's bouncer.

Alric gave Whistler a questioning look but Whistler shook his head. He wanted to feel this out first.

"Hey there. What can I get for you, stranger?" Whistler asked in a friendly voice.

"What do you have?" He said quietly.

Whistler listed off a few choice drinks while he studied the stranger closely. *This joker's barely more than a kid! He's way too young to be a sheriff or some kind of official*

investigator. Why is he asking about that caravan? If this kid keeps poking his nose where it don't belong it'll get cut off.

"So what can I get you?" Whistler said.

"I was hoping you could help me find someone," The stranger said.

Whistler's eyes narrowed slightly. "And... who might that be?" He asked slowly. Aight. He's looking for somebody. That could mean a few things. He could be a Coin from another region who's here to network with the locals. Or maybe he's a potential customer who somebody gave an 'in' to so that he could make contact here.

Or he's some clueless kid who's penetrated way too deep into our organization to be allowed to leave the bar alive.

"If you're looking for information, I'll need to see some silver first," Whistler hinted broadly, relying on a double meaning.

Members of the Black Silver Coins had a simple symbol: coins tarnished in blood. Members would often show off these coins to negotiate better deals and conditions for themselves as well as to make contact with potential allies. Exposing a tarnished silver coin 'accidentally' was an easy slip to make without attracting attention but those who knew would know. Members of the coins and their associates were expected to show vast deference toward any member of higher rank. Each step up in the ranks resulted in another coin being offered. Whistler had two coins. He was only an associate but it wasn't a bad situation for a raktin. Real membership in the Coins started at four coins where they were considered to be *untouchable* in criminal circles. The boss of bosses, the legendary King of Shadows, was reputed to have seven coins.

The stranger didn't reply to Whistler's broad hint. "I'm looking for Koi," The stranger said.

Whistler's jaw dropped. What the fuck?! This kid is bonkers. He's got no business being here. Nobody comes looking for Koi. She'll send for you if she wants you and you will probably not enjoy having her attention. This bozo is either an idiot or some kid who thinks that he's way tougher than he really is. Probably both. Either way, this kid knows way more than he should and he ain't walking out of here alive.

Still, killing folks in the bar is bad for business and it attracts too much attention. You never know when a stranger will waltz through that door at just the wrong time.

Whistler shot a knowing glance at Alric who nodded. When the stranger left the tavern, Alric would follow him and take care of business.

In the meantime, Whistler shrugged nonchalantly. "Sorry, pal. I've never heard of her," He said.

The stranger looked thoughtful. "Interesting," The stranger mused. "I didn't mention that she was a woman."

Whistler flinched and got a sour expression on his face. *This kid is way too smart for his own good. Too bad. In another situation, I might have offered him 'an in' with the Coins. Koi's always on the lookout for talent. But I'm done being nice.* "Let me give you a friendly piece of advice, kid. Get your pasty ass out of here," Whistler said with a smile too broad to be anything but threatening. "Bad things happen around here to folks after dark."

"And sometimes even *before* it gets dark," The stranger hissed, just as threateningly.

Whistler blinked. It took Whistler several seconds to even process the fact that the stranger had called his threat and then doubled down on it.

He can't be so stupid that he doesn't realize he's both outnumbered and outmatched here...

Alric snorted like a bull and grabbed the stranger's collar in a fist the size of a bowling ball. "Listen, asshole. You-"

Whistler blinked. Alric wasn't there anymore. The stranger's fist hung where Alric had been sitting. It took Whistler a moment to realize that with one punch, the stranger had knocked Alric away with such force that the giant's body had broken open against the wall. His corpse slumped against the ground, every limb twisted and frozen at an unnatural angle.

The stranger calmly turned around on his barstool and looked at the other patrons who were staring at the stranger in terrified awe. "I need to find Lady Koi," He said. "One of you is going to tell me where she is. Otherwise, in five minutes, I will be the only person in this room left breathing."

The tavern was dead silent for a moment. Then the patrons leaped to their feet and bolted out the door.

Whistler jumped off the bar and peeled up the mat behind it, revealing his hidden escape tunnel: a passage too small for anyone but a ratkin to fit through.

Whistler grabbed the trap door and struggled to pull it open.

I ain't playing with this freak! Discretion is the better half of valor! I need to get out of here and warn Koi that some monster is-

"Excuse me," A calm voice murmured.

A chill flew up Whistler's spine and he looked over his shoulder to see the stranger standing there and staring down at him.

"I still have a few questions I need answered," The stranger said calmly.

Whistler put his hands up. "Listen, buddy," He said with a friendly smile. "I don't know where Koi is. I know nothing! I'm just a flunky! I serve the drinks here!"

"And yet that stable boy ran right to you when he had something to report," The stranger mused.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, Toby's a total fucking idiot! "Well, I'm managing the bar. Tonight, I mean. My boss, he... got sick," Whistler said lamely.

The stranger looked down at him with dead eyes. "Hm. Well, if you really don't know anything," The stranger reflected. "Then I guess you're of no use to me..."

Whistler turned pale. *Oh shit! I know that tone of voice. The time for games is over.* "I'll tell you everything I know if you promise to let me go!" Whistler squeaked quickly. "I have valuable intel that will help you get in to see Koi!"

Ratkin are born survivors, no mean feat in a world that views them as nuisances at best and parasites at worst. There were few people in this world that Whistler wouldn't sell out under the right circumstances.

If Koi finds out that I ratted on her, she'll kill me and she'll probably take her own sweet time doing it. But that's a problem for tomorrow's Whistler. First, I got to find a way to keep breathing tonight...

The stranger regarded him gravely for a moment and then slowly nodded. "If the intel is *valuable*," The stranger emphasized.

Ironically, this made Whistler feel better. *If this freak had just accepted my offer, I would have known that he bullshitting me. He put some thought into it. I could tell he was weighing the benefits and costs of the bargain.*

That suggests that there really is a chance of me walking out of the bar tonight with my skin. I always knew that Koi considered me expendable and that once the right situation came up, I would be 'expended.' I've spent years gathering secrets. You never know when they'll be the only thing keep a knife out of your guts.

Whistler took a deep breath. "Listen. Lady Koi's estate isn't too far from here. It's just off the northeastern edge of the Elior Forest, not too far from the border into Lagunica," Whistler said. He gave the stranger directions.

"And was this the 'valuable intel' you mentioned?" The stranger asked skeptically.

Whistler shook his head. "No," He lowered his voice. "Lady Koi has a secret escape tunnel that nobody is supposed to know about. Especially me. It's hidden under a shed a few hundred yards from the mansion entrance. It might give you a way into the estate without being seen but the Lady is still very well-guarded. Even if you sneaked in, you'll still be dealing with dozens of armed guards once you do."

The stranger nodded slowly but didn't respond.

Whistler waited. "So... does this mean that you won't kill me?"

The stranger dropped a gold coin onto the bar and got up.

He headed for the door and left the bar without a single glance back.

This left Whistler all alone in a bar that had a body splattered all over the wall.

Whistler stared down in fascination at the small gold coin that the stranger had left on his bar. *How about that? My life for a gold coin. After years of scoffing at the idiots who crossed their patrons in the Coins, I finally ratted on Lady Koi. I've doomed myself to a slow death if she ever gets her hands on me and to spending the rest of my life on the run and in hiding. And I did it all for a single gold coin and a promise not to be killed tonight.*

But then, that's life, ain't it?

Whistler made a quick decision and reached under the bar to grab his savings, a small bag of gold coins.

Then he leaped off the bar and bolted out through the tavern door.

It was the middle of the night but the benefit of having a bar on a major trade route meant that even at night, the road was not completely quiet.

A dragon-drawn cart was coming down the road. The driver was a wagoneer dressed in shabby clothing and a leather apron. He was approaching the bar at a brisk clip. Whistler ran out into the road. "Hey! Stop!" He waved furiously.

The man reined in hard with considerable annoyance. Whistler was used to the look of disgust that the merchant directed toward him. That was just how life was for ratkin. "What do *you* want?" The man demanded.

"Hey, I'm looking to buy passage to your next stop," Whistler replied.

The merchant frowned. "That will be a silver coin," The merchant said.

That's highway robbery! Whistler wanted to snap but the ratkin threw him the coin and then climbed up into the back of the wagon.

The merchant pocketed the money and then started his dragon moving again.

"So what's your name?" The merchant shouted, seemingly more out of boredom than any real curiosity.

"Bali!" The ratkin answered. Whistler was dead.

"You know, you didn't even ask where I was going!" The merchant pointed out.

"I don't care!" Bali replied.

Dreyfus stood guard outside the manor. He'd been off shift for a while now. He would go to bed soon but as the captain of his lady's guard he tried to always do a little bit extra. It set a good example for the men. Dreyfus commanded a large security force at his lady's manor. The manor was isolated deep in the country and that made it more vulnerable to attack. Not to mention the manor was a target for the potential heat and fallout from his lady's business ventures should one ever go wrong. Lady Koi had governed the smuggler's wing of the Black Silver Coins for close to a decade and her leadership had the organization focused on keeping quiet and avoiding attention. However, his lady was no fool and she made it a point to prepare for trouble at all times.

Dreyfus was an enormous, barrel-chested man with dark skin and iron-gray hair. The two young men who guarded the main gate behind him were just as big but neither one of them could take Dreyfus in a wrestling match or a sword fight. This was something that Dreyfus was inordinately proud of. It showed that he wasn't over the hill yet and it gave his subordinates something to aspire to. That kept them training to be stronger and that made his lady's guard stronger.

Dreyfus was about to call it a night when he saw a man on a black riding dragon appear out of the darkness.

The torches along the manor wall all dimmed. They didn't extinguish but their flames grew smoky and their light grew fainter.

The man approached the gate and reined in. He was wearing a black hooded robe that looked almost liquid. It seemed to flow out of shadows around him.

"Who are you?" Dreyfus asked.

"I am here to see Lady Koi," The man replied. His voice made Dreyfus's eyes widened. He spoke with a strange reverberating echo that made his voice sound inhuman.

Dreyfus shook off his surprise, dismissing the voice and the shadowy robe as a hedge-mage's parlor trick. Dreyfus snorted. "Like hell you are! It's the middle of the night and the Lady is probably getting ready for bed. If you have a message, you can give it to me!"

Dreyfus didn't know much about magic but after decades working for the Black Silver Coins, he knew a great deal about power. He was confident in one thing: nobody truly powerful ever feels a need to *flaunt* it. If you need tricks and devices to convince others of your power, you aren't convinced yourself.

"Very well," The man said calmly. "I am the great Lord Taiyang, the Witch of the Frozen Wastes. Your Lady has offered me insult by her actions. However, in my infinite benevolence, I have come here to permit her to apologize and beg my forgiveness."

Dreyfus stared up at him in disbelief. "Get the hell out of here, you loon! If I ever see you again, I'll drag you inside and then you *will* meet the Lady! You're lucky the Lady is probably in bed or I'd drag you straight to her now and let you beg for your miserable life!"

"Oh, dear. It would grieve me so to inconvenience her," The man mused as five Guiltylowes crept into the light. The enormous beasts growled at Dreyfus who rapidly stepped back to stand side by side with his men, their swords drawn. "Tell me, how much screaming do you think the three of you would need to make before the Lady of the House roused herself to attend me?"

The three men pressed back against the gate as dozens of wolgarm appeared. Their glowing red eyes stood out sharply against the pitch black night. "What are you?" Dreyfus demanded.

The mounted figure cocked his head and nudged the dragon forward a few steps. The figure approached the torch light surrounding the manor's gate but he did not step into the light. For he brought darkness with him and the burning lanterns around the manor dimmed and flickered in his presence. "I do so hate to have to repeat myself. I am the great Lord Taiyang, the Witch of the Frozen Wastes. I am here to speak to your mistress. Would you prefer to invite me inside or shall my pets and I rip this estate apart?"

Dreyfus swallowed hard. He pulled out a whistle from his pocket and blew hard into it, although it made no noise.

Taiyang cocked his head.

Dreyfus started to smile in relief as he heard a loud thumping and smashing sound coming closer.

Dreyfus saw the massive troll, Gor, emerge from the darkness and approach the estate's front gate. It was more than twenty feet tall and had one massive eye in the middle of its forehead. Its brown skin was like rock. In its hands it carried a hammer the size of a wagon. "Sic em, Gor!" Dreyfus shouted. "Let's see your mabeasts handle a giant troll!"

To Dreyfus's shock, Taiyang just laughed. "My mabeasts? Why would I trouble them with this trifling matter?"

Taiyang slid down from his dragon and walked calmly toward Gor. "You have my gratitude as I was in the mood for some sport tonight. This troll actually makes me feel somewhat nostalgic."

Dreyfus blinked and looked at Taiyang as if he was crazy.

The troll stomped toward Taiyang with a happy smile on his enormous, ugly face as he drew back his hammer. Gor was pleased that the man showed no sign of running. Having to chase down prey was always annoying and it often meant that Gor's hammer missed its target.

The monster prepared his mighty blow, ignoring the momentary flicker of sympathy that he felt for the brave, misguided creature that he was about to kill.

Lady Koi was completing a variety of her usual bedtime rituals. She'd finished a leisurely bath and was now combing her fox tail. Koi's hair and tail were raven black with natural streaks of dark red, an unusual coloring that had gotten her a great deal of attention from admirers over the years. Koi was aware of the rumor that she died her hair in blood and found it amusing.

Kitsune demi-humans were rare and highly prized as pleasure slaves, as they looked strongly human except for their tails and ears. This was how Koi had entered this life. Quickly becoming accustomed to her beauty and her ability to manipulate men, she can fall in with a criminal cartel. She had spent her childhood being passed from owner to owner, building a small, secret fortune from selling information from those who trusted her and planning heists on the property where she was domiciled. She was now a powerful underboss of the Black Silver Coins and had a respectable estate to bequeath onto her daughter someday.

Koi was about to retire for the evening when she heard someone pounding on her bedroom door.

"Enter," She said in a languorous voice.

Dreyfus rushed into the room, his face white as chalk. Koi raised an eyebrow. Dreyfus would usually spend at least a moment captivated by her creamy skin barely covered by a loose yukata but tonight he didn't even seem to notice. Whatever was going on must be serious.

"Why, Dreyfus, whatever is wrong?" She continued in the same calm tone.

"There's a demon here, Lady Koi!" He shouted.

"...A demon," Koi repeated in a skeptical voice.

"Yes! A witch or... I don't know, Lady Koi! He says his name is Taiyang! He's brought an army of mabeasts with him and he's demanding to speak to you about something! He says that you insulted him!"

"Hm," Koi mused. She opened her balcony doors and stepped outside.

Looking down, she saw a lone man in a black robe mounted on a black riding dragon. Surrounding him were five Guiltylowe and dozens of wolgarm. Even from a distance, the man appeared unnatural. Sitting just outside the brightly lit courtyard he should have been clearly illuminated. Instead, the light of the torches seemed to actively avoid him while the shadows in the courtyard bent toward him, wrapping around his body like a shroud.

"Dreyfus, where did all that blood by the front gate come from?"

Dreyfus winced.

Koi forced herself to remain patient and not slap him out of his paralysis. Dreyfus was an extremely loyal and professional guard but he was choosing the absolute worst time to go to pieces.

"Milady, do you remember Gor?" He asked.

"You mean the giant troll that we recently tamed at considerable expense?" Koi asked in a clipped voice, "Yes, I *vaguely* recall. What about him?"

"Taiyang killed him," Dreyfus admitted.

"He turned his mabeasts on the troll?" Koi asked, staring down at the mabeast army. *I would have assumed that Gor would have had some luck, even against this huge horde of mabeasts but I don't see any mabeast corpses. Perhaps the other mabeasts ate them?*

"No, my lady. Taiyang said that... he was in the mood for sport so he decided to fight Gor personally," Dreyfus whimpered.

Koi whirled around and stared at Dreyfus, her fox ears twitching.

"He killed Gor with one blow," Dreyfus finished in a small voice.

Koi's lips tightened and she looked down at the cloaked rider weighing her options.

Hm. This is rather problematic. My personal guard is extremely well-trained and well-equipped but they wouldn't stand a chance against all these creatures, let alone their master. I've heard rumors of beings who could command mabeasts but never in such large numbers. I've never hear of any 'Taiyang' and it's unlikely that a man of such power would be easy to miss.

Where did he come from? He claims that I've insulted him? That's a grim place to start negotiations. On the other hand, he has an overwhelming advantage. If he wanted me dead, he would have simply stormed the estate. He's here to parlay, not to execute, and that gives me some manner of leverage.

All the same, I am clearly out of my league with an opponent like this. Perhaps the wisest course of action would be to simply grab Senko and escape before he realizes it.

Koi glanced at the estate's side-door and found a single wolgarm waiting there. She then looked out toward the estate's secret tunnel, known only to herself and Dreyfus. It appeared to be no more than a simple storage shed that was located some distance away from the manor house. Unless you knew exactly where to look, you would never find the tunnel underneath. Koi, to her chagrin, found an entire pack of wolgarm waiting just outside of it.

He set a guard in case I would attempt an escape. He's no fool.

More concerning is the fact that he managed to locate my hidden escape route. How could he have found it so easily?

Should I go out and speak to him? That would keep my daughter safer if negotiations break down...

No. I should invite him inside and treat him as a honored guest. If he wants an apology then that is the most likely thing to placate him but I am at a loss to what I could have possibly done to anger a being like this. He might be more vulnerable when separated from his horde of mabeasts. Although, perhaps that shouldn't be counted on considering how easily he killed Gor. Bother the luck, that troll cost me a fortune.

I'll have Dreyfus take my daughter to the safe room in the meantime. Still, this Taiyang clearly wants something from me and I doubt an apology is all he's after. I should do my best to ascertain his long term goals and convince him that I can help facilitate them. Pleasing such a powerful being could be fruitful, always assuming that I survive the initial negotiations.

"Bring him inside," Koi ordered. "I will see him in my private meeting chamber. Then wake Senko and bring her to the safe room."

Subaru stood outside the gate, staring at the guards who waited trembling beside the door. They both desperately wanted to run away but they knew that if they did, Dreyfus hunting them down and killing them would be an act of mercy. Dreyfus at least would kill them quickly. Lady Koi had a reputation for playing with her food.

Subaru nervously bit his lip. Patrasche and the mabeasts stood silently around him.

OK, Subaru. So far so good. You're establishing Taiyang as someone that nobody wants to mess with but this 'Lady Koi' is a powerful figure in the criminal underworld. If she so much as senses weakness, you'll be tomorrow night's meatloaf. You need to sell this performance. Remember when you gave into Reason and Judgment and made Crusch so angry with you back in the capitol? Well, tonight you have carte blanch. Scare the fuck out of this lady!

Also you need some kind of back-story. You need something that embeds who you are in everyone's mind and clarifies that you couldn't possibly be Subaru Natsuki in disguise.

What do you know about Taiyang? So far you've established that he lives in the Elier forest, that he's possessive of it, and that he has a bad temper. That should certainly encourage people to stay away from the forest but you need more information about him. Koi isn't going to believe that you've been sitting in the Elier forest for centuries and just now decided to poke your head out.

Maybe I could pretend to have been sleeping for a few hundred years? I got the impression that's what Daphne has been doing.

So, Taiyang has been in hibernation for centuries and he just woke up?

Is there a reason that he just woke up?

Oh! Taiyang wakes up because Subaru Natsuki is his great enemy! He hates him because of... I don't know, some prophecy bullshit! He's hunting Subaru Natsuki down! That connects the two together and makes it so that no one is going to wonder if they're really the same person.

Among other things, you're about to ask Koi to help you find the spirits. How are you going to justify that? As soon as you tell her what she's looking for, she'll know that you have some kind of connection with Subaru Natsuki but if Taiyang is his greatest foe, then the question is immediately answered. You're trying to trap and kill Subaru! You want to capture the spirits as bait!

Hide your lies in half truths and Koi will believe them...

Subaru was polishing his scheme a little when Dreyfus came back outside the estate and bowed to Subaru. "The Lady Koi will see you now."

Subaru didn't move. "...Perhaps you left something out of that statement?"

Dreyfus flushed. "My lord," He added.

"Splendid. I may yet let you live."

Dreyfus's face turned ashen.

"Enough of this. Bring me to her."

Dreyfus nodded and walked into the fortress-like estate and Subaru followed him.

The guards both flinched and recoiled as Subaru passed within touching distance of them. Shadows crisped the blazing torches as he passed by.

OK, Subaru. Show time! Use Reason and Judgment as much as you need to! This woman is not going to respond to polite requests and negotiation. The more you terrify her the better off you are!

"Welcome to my humble abode," Koi said with a graceful bow. Her black yukata slipped off one shoulder, revealing snow-white skin. Koi hadn't taken the time to change before meeting with Taiyang, hoping to make herself appear eager to please. She meant this statement in a variety of ways.

"Lady Koi, I presume," Taiyang murmured in an inhuman voice.

Koi had thought herself fearless but upon meeting Taiyang her heart started to beat fast. In Taiyang's presence, the room's candle-flames crisped with shadows and the darkness in the room grew deeper. An unnatural chill filled the room.

Koi paused to moisten her lips. Koi was a hard woman. The pain and suffering she had endured would be legendary if it were ever to become public knowledge. She had often scoffed at men who boasted of their hardihood because of deeds in battle or fights in back alleys. Koi knew that none of these compared to the unspeakable horrors endured by a slave woman in a brothel.

Koi forced herself to remain calm by sheer willpower.

The meeting chamber was a commodious space, very much like a sitting room. The room was dimly lit by a variety of candles scattered around the room. There was a glass table in the middle of the room holding a pot of freshly prepared tea. Several soft chairs and couches surrounded the table and the shelves were full of objects that were pleasing to look at. There was even a zen garden in the corner. Koi had designed this room herself with great care. It reminded her of the rooms she used to live in when she worked as a courtesan and it often reminded her guests of the same thing. This was a

helpful state of mind to guide her guests into when she needed to placate or manipulate someone.

Koi's mind was working overtime trying to analyze everything about her guest. The smallest clue could give her an advantage.

Taiyang wore a hooded black robe that looked like it was made of shadows as much as cloth. For some reason, no details about him jumped out at her at all.

Nothing. I can't pick out anything useful. In fact, standing this close to him I should be able to see his face clearly. He must be using magic to hide it. Is that a sign that he fears that I might figure out who he is? Or is it a warning that this man has enough magic to squander it on meaningless parlor tricks even while seated inside my fortress? After seeing his mabeast army and the way he slew Gor, I think I suspect the latter. I must tread carefully.

His voice sounds like it's echoing out of a deep cave. For the moment, I'll assume that he is just using magic to disguise it. I don't like to contemplate the possibility that it could be his natural voice...

"Please make yourself comfortable," Koi whispered, sitting down on a sofa just large enough for two, coiling her legs and tail underneath her.

Taiyang sat in a nearby chair, ignoring her unspoken invitation to join her on the sofa.

"I was shocked and dismayed to discover that I may, in some way, have displeased your lordship," Koi continued with a slight smile as she gracefully poured tea into two porcelain cups.

She handed a cup to Taiyang first and then took one herself.

They each took a sip.

"Please forgive my ignorance, Great One but I simply can not fathom what I might have done to so offend you. Please, enlighten me so that I may beg your pardon properly," Koi continued, sipping her tea.

"Are you aware of your men's recent sojourn into the Elier Forest?" Taiyang asked.

Oh. So that's it. There really is a witch in the forest and it is the monster Taiyang. It seems that I should have taken old Joe's stories more seriously. All the same, I doubt that Taiyang is really as angry as he appears. This is a minor mishap. It's also put me in contact with what is clearly a powerful being. This may yet be turned to my advantage if Zeno keeps causing trouble.

Should I feign ignorance of my men's trespass? No, that would be unwise. My men have certainly given me up and likely died in the process of doing so. That at least spares me the trouble of hunting them down and killing them myself. Perhaps I can shift the focal point of his ire.

"A thousand apologies, Great One," Koi murmured, giving a low bow from her seated position. "It never even crossed my mind that you would consider this matter intrusive. I can assure you that no such mistakes will ever happen again. You have my word. I will also endeavor to inform the slavers who have been running merchandise through your sacred forest to desist."

"Slavers?" Taiyang asked.

That caught his interest, Koi thought, hiding a smile. With any luck, he will redirect his rage against Aperitif.

"Are you speaking of Osril?" He asked.

Koi blinked. "Then... you are familiar with Duke Osril?"

"I was familiar with the *late* Duke Osril," Taiyang replied. "He and his men paid the penalty for their unauthorized use of my domain as well as for their own failures."

Koi wasn't entirely sure what Taiyang meant but it didn't matter right now. She quickly updated her calculations.

Did he really kill a Duke? That is going to attract a great deal of unfavorable attention from the kingdom which is not at all conducive to a monster trying to stay hidden. Either he is a complete fool... or he's fearless.

"Were they working for you, Great One?" Koi asked. "You spoke of their failures."

"They were not working for me," Taiyang growled. "I have a profound hatred of slavers."

"In that matter, we are most certainly agreed, Lord Taiyang," Koi assured him.

"Yes. I can see that you were once considered a valuable slave yourself," Taiyang replied, sipping his tea.

Koi blinked. "Forgive me, my lord but how did you know about that?"

How does he know that? Is he just assuming that to be true because so many of my people are captured due to their beauty? Or has he done some kind of research on me?

"I did not know. I saw," Taiyang replied. "When you bowed your head to me, I saw the marks on the back of your neck. You once wore a collar and due to the marks, it is clear that you wore it habitually, not simply as a game of some kind. On most slaves, these marks appear all around the neck because slaves are chained together in a line when they travel to market. Each slave must move in sync or they yank on one another's collar and bruise one another. You only have marks on one side of your neck. Therefore you were a slave who was never chained to others. The only time your collar was yanked was when your master personally wished to lead you on a leash. This means that your master valued you highly."

Koi struggled to maintain her composure. She sipped her tea calmly but her fox ears twitched. *Either Taiyang is lying to me and he squeezed all that information out of my men... Would any of them even know that I was ever a slave? ...Joe might. He's been around for decades after all and he has a reputation for knowing secrets that he shouldn't. Although I doubt that even he would have known about this.*

If even old Joe couldn't tell him about this then Taiyang must have been telling the truth about deducing it. If Taiyang could learn all that about me simply by glancing at my neck then he is a shrewd and dangerous man. He must be trying to warn me that his physical power is matched by an equally impressive mind.

As frightening as all this is, it is also encouraging. You don't waste this much time terrorizing a person that you expect to discard quickly. He intends to have a long term relationship with me. Being Taiyang's minion would clearly have serious drawbacks but it's far preferable to being executed tonight. Perhaps there could be advantages as well. Zeno's demands and threats against my division of the Black Silver Coins get louder each day. I should shift the conversation to somewhere more profitable.

"Excuse me, Lord Taiyang, you said that the slavers failed you. Could you explain how?"

Taiyang took another sip of tea. "When I awoke from my long slumber, one of the first things I encountered were those slavers practicing their wickedness in my sacred domain. My fury was terrible to behold. I would have slain Osril and all his men on the spot but he begged the chance to do me a service to purchase his life. He promised that he would acquire my hated enemy for me. He then sent a message informing me that my enemy had been captured and I departed immediately to take charge of him. However, when I arrived I discovered that my foe had escaped Osril and rescued all of

the slaves as well! Osril and his fools never saw anything! I have no patience for such incompetence. They paid the price for their failures. This is also what brings me to you."

Taiyang has an enemy... Interesting. I should inquire more about this. Knowing who a man hates offers the chance to play both ends against the middle if I don't think I can keep Taiyang happy in the long run. This enemy of Taiyang freed the slaves while also rescuing himself? He sounds like the kind of man I could learn to like. However, the notion that this business with the slavers has brought Taiyang here concerns me. What could he be referring to? I had no relationship with Osril. The man turned my stomach and the one thing that I never trade in is flesh.

"I'm afraid that I do not follow, Great One. What could I have to do with this?" Koi asked with a shrug.

In answer, Taiyang took a heavy pouch out from his robe and placed it on the table. Koi glanced at it. It was full of gold coins.

"Gold?" She asked, hoping for more information.

"Gold that I took off your men," Taiyang clarified.

Koi frowned in real puzzlement. This doesn't make any sense. There have to be almost two hundred gold coins in that pouch. Where could those idiots have gotten this kind of money? Even if they had been coming back from selling their goods, this is far too much. This much gold could have bought the entire shipment four times over.

Taiyang sipped his tea. "Gold that your men accepted from my foe to smuggle him across the border and away from my traps," Taiyang continued calmly.

Koi's beautiful eyes blazed in sudden fury as she fought to keep her face smooth and even. Those idiots! They've dragged me into a feud between a demon and whatever other monster he's fighting!

No wonder Taiyang is so angry! I don't want to be caught in the middle of this! Now I'll probably have to make reparations to him for what those fools did! I hope that Taiyang killed them slowly!

"Are you certain?" Koi asked, putting a note of astonishment into her voice, "That is astounding! I have given standing orders that my men are not to involve themselves in any manner of private enterprise without my explicit permission."

"And yet, my foe slipped away from me due to the Black Silver Coins. Once again, I have been denied the pleasure of killing him," Taiyang mused, putting the bag back in his robe.

Koi moistened her suddenly dry lips. "I knew nothing about this matter but of course, as their superior, I must take full responsibility for my men's mistakes. If there is anyway I can make this up to you, you need simply ask and it will be yours."

Taiyang steepled his fingers. "Since your men robbed me of my prey, despite my spending considerable money, resources, and time to capture him, I believe that it's only right that you should help me find him again."

Koi breathed a little easier. "Of course, exalted one. The Black Silver Coins have eyes all over the continent. I will be only too happy to help you track down this enemy. What is his name?"

Taiyang gave a faint hiss. "Subaru Natsuki," Taiyang answered.

Koi closed her eyes and swallowed hard. This is a nightmare. I'm caught in the crossfire between a royal candidate and national hero on one side and a demon of terrifying power on the other!

"I will, of course, assist you in any way I can, Great One," Koi whispered, struggling to hold her hands still as she poured more tea. "However, when last I heard, Subaru Natsuki had vanished and no one seems to know quite where he is."

"Yes. His luck has been annoyingly consistent," Taiyang agreed. "I have chased him from the western expanses of the continent to the furthest east."

Koi's eyes narrowed. "He must have done something truly terrible to earn such contempt from your lordship," She said in a coaxing voice.

"He has done nothing!" Taiyang said flatly. "He is a foolish boy and barely that! He is a whelp pretending at being a man! He's an ignorant bungler with a deluded estimate of how clever he is: Treacherous to foes, faithless to friends, and a craven coward at heart!"

Oh my. Taiyang really hates Subaru Natsuki. It's actually kind of impressive how much he despises him.

"Might I be so bold as to ask why you want him dead so badly, my lord?" Koi asked.

Taiyang drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "I have seen futures in him. Futures that I will *not* allow! When I awoke from my slumber, I knew what must be done. I will kill this Subaru Natsuki myself, slowly. With his death, I break the chain for all time. I will suffer no one else to claim his life."

Well, that doesn't tell me much. I'd very much like to be out of this situation entirely but that seems unlikely at this juncture. If I have to deal with Taiyang anyway, I should try to find some advantage.

"Lord Taiyang, tell me, how much do you know about the Black Silver Coins?" Koi asked.

"Very little," Taiyang admitted. "It never caught my interest."

"And rightly so," Koi agreed. "It's far beneath the notice of a great lord such as yourself. However, factions of the Black Silver Coins have a long history of worshipping the Witches of Sin. I wonder if it might not please you to become involved in our organization. I'm certain you would have many eager servants."

If he bites for this then the other underbosses will share in my plight and I'll get a little less direct attention from Taiyang. It will also force Zeno to deal with Taiyang and give Cynthia and I space to breathe. There might even be advantages in being the underboss most directly connected with Taiyang.

"Perhaps," Taiyang murmured after a moment's thought.

He sounds intrigued. That's promising.

"In the meantime, I have a task for you," Taiyang continued.

"Find Subaru Natsuki," Koi finished.

This is going to be hard. Everyone in the kingdom is looking for him and Subaru Natsuki has still managed to keep out of sight. That said, if a monster like Taiyang is chasing him then I don't fault the man one bit.

This is bad for me though. Taiyang seems to have small tolerance for failure.

"No," Taiyang grumbled. "You'll never find him. He's led me on a chase across the continent. I need you to find something else."

Koi cocked her head, unable to even guess what it was.

"Subaru Natsuki had two Great Spirits in his care. He treated them like family. They are currently in the keeping of the kingdom. You will find these spirits for me so that I may capture them. Then Subaru Natsuki will come to me. I also wish to know everything you can learn about the whereabouts and activities of his knight and companions," Taiyang explained.

That is actually a pretty good plan to draw Subaru Natsuki out of hiding. Even better, it's the kind of request that I think I can deliver on. This information might be restricted or even classified but if it earns Taiyang's gratitude, I'm sure that we can extort it or buy it from someone.

"Of course, my lord. I will see to it straight away. In fact I'd recommend you come to a full council of the Black Silver Coins so that the entire organization can hear your instructions. I'm sure the other underbosses will be eager to help."

"Very well," Taiyang agreed.

Wonderful. I have no expectations of being able to set an effective trap for Taiyang at the meeting and it would be dangerous to try but at least the other underbosses can take a good look at him. This should spread his attention around as well so that he won't be so focused on me. Beyond that, maybe it will persuade Zeno and Scrofa to back off! I have a powerful Witch who seeks to work with me. He should be more reluctant to cause my division trouble now.

On the other hand, Koga may try to move into my house once he finds out that Taiyang might come here.

"There is one more thing," Taiyang mused and Koi snapped her attention back onto her guest. "Locating the spirits will atone for the inconvenience that your men caused me but you must still atone for the insult."

Koi's felt sweat dripping down the back of her neck.

"When I awoke from my long slumber, I discovered that the world has changed in my absence. The vast network of allies and vassals that I had cultivated have vanished into the dustbin of history. Now only Taiyang remains as witness of the ancient world," Taiyang paused and seemed to think for a moment. Then he shook his head. "But that is as it should be. Only the eternal Taiyang endures. One of the Great Houses of Gusteko has offered itself up as my ward. Confidentially, for now. In return," Taiyang continued. "I have pledged to House Ithil my protection. I shall bury House Griest until none remember it, save for the wind. But that is in time. To endure the siege, House Ithil require supplies and you shall provide them. Siros will be well stocked and well provisioned and they will pay you very well for your labors. Both of my subjects shall become stronger just as those who set themselves against me shall wither."

Koi's eyes widened. *Taiyang has become the shadow lord of one of the great Houses of Gusteko?! Could he be lying?*

He could be but why bother? What would be the point?

What is he doing? He's offering me the chance to make an absolute fortune through war profiteering.

This isn't a demand. I mean, it IS a demand. I'm sure that Taiyang would simply kill me if I was stupid enough to refuse him but Taiyang has taken away the stick and offered me a carrot.

I have no more choice not to bite at this carrot than I do to avoid the blow of the stick but he offers them both in measure...

He's proving that if I'm loyal to him, he will bring me great wealth. He's proving that those he claims under his protection WILL be protected. This is all better than I dared to hope. Taiyang might be just the leverage I need against Zeno and Scrofa.

Running supplies through a warzone is risky but not much worse than running them across the border to a Gusteko in turmoil anyway. House Ithil's situation is dire from what I've heard. We can charge exorbitantly for the goods and they will be glad to pay.

House Ithil was never willing to deal with smugglers in the past. They consider us a threat to their merchant empire. I never even bothered to extend them an offer when I discovered they were under siege.

Taiyang is a shrewd and dangerous man. I'll need to play this carefully. I've never been in greater danger but the rewards of Taiyang's favor could be immeasurable and that's not even counting the wealth he has already offered me.

If I can claim the protection of a true Witch of Sin then what power in the world would dare to attack me?

Koi asked, "What types of goods does-"

Taiyang reached into his shadowy robe which parted around his fingers as if he had plunged his hand into an inky black river. Taiyang pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Koi.

Koi steeled herself before touching the paper but it felt completely normal in her hand.

"Ah," Koi replied. She studied it briefly. *Nothing too unusual. We can get these goods moving tonight! If I sent instructions to my factors in Gusteko by messenger owl, the goods are likely to arrive sometime tomorrow afternoon! And the prices being offered per item are extraordinary!*

"I will see to it immediately, Lord Taiyang," Koi assured him with a low bow. "To earn your exalted forgiveness by such a small task? Your lordship's benevolence truly knows no bounds."

"Yes," He agreed.

Should I talk to him about Zeno now?

No. It's too soon. It will make me look weak and desperate. He might choose to make an alliance with Zeno instead.

I need to deliver a few shipments first and ideally locate the spirits he seeks. Then, once I am factually 'doing his bidding,' I will be able to ask Taiyang for his protection.

Koi made a quick mental calculation. "I would urge your lordship to return here tomorrow night to receive an update on the success of these ventures. We should have confirmation of our first shipment in Siros by then."

"Very well. I will do so," He said, standing up.

"You have my deepest gratitude, Lord Taiyang. I hope for a very long and mutually beneficial relationship serving your lordship," Koi said, also rising to her feet.

"You shall have it, so long as you are diligent and obedient," Taiyang replied. "I demand only the best and I reward accordingly."

"You will have no complaints where I am concerned, my lord, I assure you," Koi said, bowing low.

Taiyang gave a cold chuckle. "Amusing. A gift then," Taiyang reached into his robe and handed Koi a tiny bottle, the sort of bottle that could hold a single shot of alcohol. Koi examined the unlabeled bottle closely. It contained a radiant blue liquid that felt warm in her hands.

I doubt it's poison. Taiyang certainly doesn't need poison to kill me. He slew my troll and commands an army of mabeasts.

"Forgive me, Lord Taiyang but what is this?"

"A Year of Life."

Koi blinked. "A what?"

"Whosoever drinks that potion will have their life and youth extended by a full year. Or be granted a full year's worth of healing to their wounds and illnesses," Taiyang said. "To his faithful servants, Taiyang grants life unending..."

Koi's jaw dropped and her hand trembled. "Truly?" She gasped.

It seems incredible that this could be true but Taiyang has no reason to lie to me. I was speculating earlier about what the rewards of Taiyang's favor could be. And now he's demonstrated his favor to ensure that I remain loyal.

If Taiyang really can offer immortality and eternal youth... what greater prize could Senko and I aspire to? Not to mention that the wealthy on this continent would pay mountains of gold to extend their lives just a few more months...

"Are you suggesting that the great Taiyang would stoop to deceive you?" He asked calmly.

Koi jumped. "No! Of course not! I was just... overwhelmed by your power, Master. I will see your will carried out without fail," She whispered in awe, staring at the bottle.

"Wonderful. And please offer my fond regards to your daughter."

Koi's face flickered in shock. She smoothed it out by raw willpower. "Excuse me?"

"Your daughter," Taiyang said, idly flicking a hair off of his finger. "I'm certain that she's every bit as lovely as her mother."

How does he know?! How could even Taiyang know that I have a daughter in this estate?! None of the smugglers could have told him! Only the people who work inside my estate even know that Senko exists! And only Dreyfus knows that Senko is my own kit! Everyone else believes that I've purchased and am raising a young kitsune to sell for a tidy profit. How could Taiyang know? Is it some kind of witchcraft?

Koi licked her lips and tried a desperate strategy. "Are you referring to the young kitsune that I purchased and am training for courtesan work?"

"You are extremely gracious to this slave. Her perfume is both expensive and exquisite. And to so often entertain this kit in your private chambers? Her hairs are everywhere, distinguishable by being so much shorter than your own. Oddly enough, each hair is dyed. They are blond at the ends but at the root they are all black or dark red just like yours. You are truly a diligent woman. As a sign of good faith, I promise that I will keep a close eye out for your offspring. I would spend many a sleepless night if anything... unfortunate were to befall her," Taiyang said calmly.

Koi bowed low and stayed there. "I thank you for your kind words," She said in an unsteady whisper.

Taiyang turned and left the room. In his absence, the candle flames strengthened and the room brightened.

Koi swallowed hard. Taiyang was gone but she couldn't find the strength to straighten up from her bow just yet.

Taiyang is telling me that if I fail him or try to betray him, he knows right where to stick the knife. Should I send Senko away to hide her somewhere else?

No! Stupid! Sending her away is sending her directly into Taiyang's clutches! If he could deduce her existence after looking at my sofa, how easily will he find Senko no matter

where I try to hide her?!

No. We are both Taiyang's hostages now. Besides I need to use Taiyang to deal with Zeno and Scrofa. After that, I can at least hope to find a way to get loose of his strangling chain.

Until and unless I find a way to break free, I must be his dutiful and obedient little kit. I have played this role before. In the meantime, I must discover all the ways that I can... please my new master and seek to ferret out his weak spots.

Perhaps if I were to find this Subaru Natsuki, he could aid me in dealing with Taiyang. If anyone can handle that monster, it must be the person that he most fears. Taiyang doesn't fool me for a moment. Hatred this pure is always born of fear. Taiyang fears Subaru Natsuki. And yet he wants to face him personally...

Taiyang said that he saw 'futures' in him. That suggests that Subaru Natsuki isn't a threat to him now but he will be a threat later. Perhaps Subaru Natsuki is destined to destroy Taiyang and the demon seeks to kill him before he comes into his own? Taiyang is clearly in a rush to do it though. I'm guessing that the time when Subaru Natsuki will be a threat to Taiyang isn't all that far off.

If Subaru Natsuki is this kind of threat to Taiyang, that means that if I can find him, he might just be able to get me out of this mess...

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5**

Subaru rode home from Koi's manor, deep in thought. He'd dispelled his Taiyang disguise after the first few miles.

So that went pretty well, Subaru mused. It seems like Koi is scared enough of me to do what I want. I also saw the stone greed on her face when I offered her that Year. She better be excited. That vial cost me one of Emilia's precious days!

On the plus side, I created a viable relationship between Taiyang and... um well, 'me,' as well as a believable motivation for Taiyang to be hunting the spirits.

It was only while I was talking to Koi that I realized that Taiyang might have another use. Emilia's and my goal remains to disappear and to get away from the royal selection and everything. But people aren't going to just stop looking for us, even after Emilia's memories are restored. No matter where we hide there is a good chance of people coming to find us. And after we cure her, everyone will remember that Emilia came from the Elio forest and tear it apart looking for us.

But if the whole world thinks that we're dead...

Taiyang, that terrible monster, hunts down and murders the 'noble hero,' Subaru Natsuki.

Once I have the spirits back, all I need to do is arrange a convincing fireworks show and provide a pair of bodies burned beyond recognition.

Boom. Subaru and Emilia are both dead and nobody is looking for us anymore.

Everyone goes hunting for Taiyang and that means that they look right past a human and an elf living quietly in a cottage somewhere.

Eventually, after a year or two with no sightings, everyone just assumes that Taiyang went back to his slumber and he becomes a myth. Then we can live out our lives in peace and quiet.

Subaru got home late that night. He tried to creep inside quietly but he heard the girls chatting from the sitting room.

"Hey, Mili," Subaru said, walking into the room. "I'm back."

Emilia sat on the sofa while Anri was sitting in a chair close by.

"Welcome home, Subaru," Emilia smiled. "We waited to eat until you could come back. Where did you go today?"

Subaru fought down another surge of jealousy. *Emilia is so much happier now that stupid Anri is here. Why? Why wasn't I enough?!*

Subaru cleared his throat and sat down beside Emilia. "Well, I did get a few things done," Subaru admitted. "I made contact with a criminal cartel and got them to look for the spirits. I also convinced them to stay out of the forest from now on." Subaru frowned and then sighed and covered his eyes. "Unfortunately, I was an idiot and forgot to ask about the sal-ammoniac. I'll need to go back there now and see if I can get some."

"Sal-ammoniac?" Emilia asked, puzzled.

"It's something I use to make your medicine," He explained. Subaru glanced at Anri. "Oh. Good news," Subaru said dolorously. "I got you your supplies. They're supposed to arrive at Siros sometime the day after tomorrow."

Anri's jaw dropped. "You did all that in *one* night?!"

Emilia smiled broadly. "See, Anri?" Emilia said proudly. "I told you that you didn't have to worry. Subaru will take care of all your problems. My Subaru can do anything!"

Yeah. I'm super good at solving everyone else's problems. If only I could solve my own...

"I wouldn't say that I solved her problems yet, Mili," Subaru replied. "I just bought us a little time."

"So, is our plan to go to Siros?" Emilia asked.

Subaru raised an eyebrow.

"Anri was telling me about a brilliant doctor who lives there," Emilia explained.

Subaru gave Anri a cold look. She stared back at him innocently.

Subaru sighed. "*Maybe*. Before we head that way, I have an army to deal with. Or two..."

Emilia looked worried. "Subaru... you need to be careful," She warned. "Don't try to do too much..."

Subaru chuckled. "Whatever happened to 'My Subaru can do anything?'" He teased.

Emilia looked conflicted.

After supper, Anri volunteered to help Emilia get ready for bed, something Subaru had seriously mixed feelings about but he understood that Emilia would be more comfortable having a girl assist her with certain things so he bit his tongue.

Subaru quickly did the dishes and then visited the lab.

Subaru took stock of his remaining supplies. *Alright. I'm out of sal-ammoniac and I need that to refine Vitae from any more lives I collect. I need to get to Ganaks in the next few days. Ganaks is a huge city so I should be able to find what I need there.*

Or conversely I need to ask Koi to get me some more supplies.

I also need to fix my cash flow problem. Soma is a potent stimulant and painkiller and it's fairly easy to make if you know how. It would probably be a popular recreational drug. Daphne's Acolytes enjoyed it. Not to the extent that they enjoyed Anima but still. I should be able to sell it for a hefty sum if I can make contact with the right distributor.

Lady Koi seems like a sensible choice. When I go to see her tomorrow night I'll bring her some Soma and ask her what she'll give me for it.

Is that something Taiyang would do? It doesn't seem very 'ancient witchy.'

Then again, everybody needs money. And maybe I could justify it by giving Koi a new source of revenue so she could do work for me more effectively?

Or maybe I could sell her Years? I mean, what would fetch a higher price than time itself?

But right now, each Year is precious. I don't know if I dare squander them on gold. Emilia needs one every single day and I only have about thirty days left...

The next morning passed quietly. Subaru spent most of it fussing in the lab while Emilia and Anri talked about the books that they had been reading.

Shortly after lunch, Emilia decided to lay down.

Subaru returned to his lab and had just finished setting up the reactants for a batch of *Soma* when Anri came into the room.

"Subaru, Emilia's in bed," Anri murmured. "She fell asleep almost immediately."

"OK," Subaru said, focusing on his chemicals.

"Subaru, there's... something I need to show you," Anri said slowly.

Subaru sighed. "Another problem?" He asked wearily.

"Probably," Anri said.

"Whatever. Spill it."

"When I went out to the market this morning to buy food, I found this," Anri reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

Subaru frowned and picked up the paper.

Hey cunt-nuggets,

New orders, bitches. I assume you've at least managed to make camp at the forest by Daiwer's ridge by now. Whatever. I'll see you there tonight. I thought I finally had the little titless-wonder right where I wanted her but she managed to slip away again! There's been no sign of her on the western border. You incompetent sluts have damn better found SOMETHING useful or I'll rip you limb from limb. That little raspberry-boobed tramp Kairei is likely still running around the forest so make sure she doesn't get past you. You've already blown this three times and I am so fucking done with the both of you. If Princess Flat-as-a-board-Easy-to-nail gets away, I'll turn the both of you numb cunts into a big swarm of spiders.

At the bottom of the letter, the flowing elegant handwriting changed to kindergarten chicken-scratch where it said:

-Mother

"Well, that's as clear as mud," Subaru grumbled.

"But whoever it is, they're looking for me," Anri pointed out.

"Yeah. That's not good. I'm guessing there's no chance that these are friends of yours?"

Anri gave him a thin smile. "I'd like to think that my House's shadows don't hold me in this kind of contempt. And it doesn't have any of the markers of the messages of our House. This message came from someone else."

"House Griest?"

"They do seem to be the most likely candidates," Anri admitted. "But I have no idea who 'Mother' could be. Sanshi doesn't usually let women occupy positions of power. I doubt a woman runs their spy network."

Subaru let ideas chase each other around in his head but they failed to lead anywhere. Instead, something else came to mind.

Subaru frowned. "Anri, how did you find this note?"

Anri started. "Oh! Well, I was... walking through town to buy some food and I... noticed a bush by the road and the letter was hidden under it."

Subaru frowned at her. "You just *happened* to search under that specific bush?" Subaru asked with profound skepticism.

"I was given some training as a Shadow," She said quickly. "Anyway, I noticed that this particular bush would be an ideal dead-drop for messages so I... just decided to check to see if any messages from Siros had been left there. There wasn't."

"But Griest or somebody else was using it as a dead-drop site," Subaru finished in a skeptical tone.

That's what happened," Anri nodded.

Subaru squinted at Anri. *That story is absolute fucking bullshit. The odds of her finding this letter the way that Anri claims it happened have got to be a million to one. At least a million to one. So... that's three lies that she's told me. Three lies that I know about!*

Under any other circumstances I'd just boot Anri out of the house. She's not staying here if I can't trust her.

The problem is, I don't have that option. Not only would getting rid of Anri put Emilia back into a depression, I can't let Anri leave here without risking her ratting us out, on purpose or by accident.

A cold voice whispered to him, *And you can't kill her without risking Emilia finding out about it. That would be enough to send her into a full-blown breakdown.*

Subaru jumped. *Wait. Did I really just consider killing Anri simply out of expedience?*

...I must be more stressed out than I thought.

Besides, even if I could get rid of Anri, I still need her to watch Emilia while I'm out...

Alright. Let's think this through. Anri is lying to me. Why?

People lie for a reason. So this lie must benefit her in some way.

She lied to me about how she found us and she lied to me about how she got this paper.

Why? What's the benefit of concealing her source of information to me?

...Shit. She wouldn't really be hiding things from me just to preserve the sanctity of her stupid Shadow spy-network would she? She can't be that dumb.

OK. Maybe she is that dumb. But are there any other reasons to conceal the source of her knowledge?

Maybe the note is bait? Whoever-it-is sent Anri with the message to lure me out of hiding?

No, that's bullshit. It doesn't make sense. If Griest or whoever bought off Anri... let's just say for the sake of argument that Griest promised Anri that she could keep her own head in exchange for mine. From what I've heard, I don't think Griest would keep that bargain in a million years but that's beside the point.

If Anri was working for whoever-it-is then there's no point to luring me anywhere. They would have an inside asset here who knew where I was and what I was doing and they could have just come crashing through the door whenever they felt like it.

Maybe they're trying to get me out of the house to get to Emilia?

Well... who's they? Griest? Same problem. They'll know when I leave and they can just wait until I did.

No. I don't think this is bait.

I really don't trust Anri right now but I think that the letter is genuine.

So what do I do with this information?

Maybe you should go, A quiet voice in Subaru's mind whispered. You can find out who's looking for Anri and hopefully squeeze some valuable information out of them.

Subaru mulled it over for a long moment. "Anri," He said in a neutral voice. "What do you think I should do?"

"Do about what?"

"About that letter."

Anri blinked. "Um... maybe we could rewrite the letter to tell whoever-it-is to go far away and then hide it under the bush again so they find it?" She suggested.

Subaru squinted at her. *I seriously doubt that would work. I don't know how bright Griest's agents are but they would probably have some misgivings about those kind of orders. And the idea also depends on us being good enough at forgery to fool them and that's something I wouldn't want to bet on.*

Alright, if Anri has no idea what she wants me to do about this, then it probably isn't bait.

At least it isn't her bait.

Subaru made a face. *My instincts tell me I should go investigate this. I just hope that I'm not biting off more than I can chew.*

"Anri, do you know what 'Daiwer's ridge' refers to?" Subaru murmured to Anri.

Anri nodded. "It's a little mountain not far from here where centuries ago, Prince Daiwer was said to have held off a Lagunican army for three weeks. I've been there plenty of times. It's a fun place to explore or go camping."

"And is there a forest near there?"

"Yeah, a small one. Subaru, are you going to go...*looking* for these guys?"

"We need to find out what they're up to," Subaru said in a distracted voice as he began to connect a group of flasks together with tubing.

"Subaru! These could be assassins from House Griest! Do you have any idea how dangerous these people are?!" Anri gasped. "They've killed my entire escort!"

"Trust me, I can handle whoever they are. I need to finish making a few things and then I'll head toward Kocytos. I need to take care of some stuff tonight so I might not be back until sometime tomorrow morning."

"*Tomorrow?*!" Anri protested.

"I want you to sit here and take care of Emilia until I get back," Subaru said.

"You're going *alone*!?" Anri asked incredulously.

"I can *handle* it," Subaru said again with an edge in his voice. "Don't let Emilia come looking for me! Chain her to the wall if you have to!"

"Subaru, she can't *walk*," Anri reminded him.

Subaru sighed. "I wouldn't put it past her," He whispered in a morose tone. "Emilia has a remarkable reserve of willpower."

Anri opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again, looking awkward. Subaru didn't notice.

He sighed and showed Anri the tiny, sealed bottles of *Vitae* that he had made. "Listen. Emilia needs a dose of the *Vitae* every twenty four hours. Her next dose is after dinner time but I probably won't be back by then."

"Wow," Anri murmured. "I never realized that you knew so much about medicine."

Yeah, all I had to do was sell my finger to a witch and eat her finger in return. I learned all kinds of cool stuff! I sure wish that school had been that easy.

As the day started to fade, a twelve year old girl with dark hair tended the campfire deep in the forest. She was trying to skin some kind of small animal. The girl's name was Meili.

Meili wasn't having much luck preparing the carcass for human consumption which was why the beast was hard to identify as anything more specific than 'animal.'

Honestly, Meili didn't really see the point of skinning her food before eating it. Meili had been raised in the wild by mabeasts. She never used to bother removing the skin from her meals but Big Sis had been most insistent on Meili learning how to behave like a normal human in order to blend in better so Meili had gone along with it.

Meili heard a twig snap behind her. "Hey, Big Sis," Meili called, not bothering to turn around.

Meili had no doubts about who was there. Any stranger would have taken one look at the campsite and run away in fear because the campsite was absolutely overrun with mabeasts.

Meili lay back against a massive Guiltylowe, using the napping monster as a pillow. A small pack of wolgarm lounged nearby, enjoying the heat from the campfire. Tiny black birds with red eyes perched in the branches of nearby trees and a few small possum-like mabeasts called Banassi lounged around on the ground.

The mabeasts all belonged to Meili who had been able to control the mabeasts as far back as she could remember. Because of her Divine Blessing, Meili and the mabeasts could sense each other's thoughts and the mabeasts had accepted Meili into the pack as one of their own. She'd grown up in the wilds with nothing but mabeasts for company until two years ago when on Mother's orders, Elsa had ventured into the wilds to bring back Meili as one of Mother's newest Children. Meili had spent months locked in a kennel, slowly being taught how to speak and act like a human.

Mother's Nannies specialized in breaking the will of children so that they would grow up to worship Mother and be willing to die for her. Meili had been one of their most difficult cases. Not because of her strong will but because the Nannies simply didn't understand how to cope with a child that couldn't speak the language, had no experience with other humans, and simply didn't understand what was being asked of it. Mother almost certainly would have lost patience with Meili and executed her but Elsa took an interest in the girl and began to visit Meili's kennel regularly. Elsa would remember to feed Meili when the Nannies did not. Meili quickly bonded with Elsa and began to emulate her. This had ultimately saved her life as Meili slowly became capable of impersonating a normal human being to carry out Mother's orders. The two had been as close as sisters ever since.

Elsa approached the monster-infested camp without any visible concern. Although she did look at the food that Meili was trying to prepare with clear trepidation.

"Good news, Meili," Elsa said calmly. "I stopped in Stoneybrooke and I got us dinner."

Meili sighed and looked with chagrin at the ragged remains of the carcass that she had been skinning. Then she shrugged and threw the tattered animal into the bushes.

A few of the Banassi lunged at the bloody carcass and sank their teeth into it but it only took them a few moments to realize that it was dead. After this, they immediately lost all interest in tearing it to pieces and left the ragged animal where it lay.

"Anything else going on?" Meili asked as Elsa sat down beside her.

"The village is terrified of something. I never got the details. I also checked all the local drop spots. No new orders from Mother," Elsa said, pulling two loaves of cheese-bread out of her satchel and handing one to Meili.

Meili bit into one. "That's not too strange," She said through a mouthful of bread.

"No. But it might be a problem this time," Elsa said in a vague, dreamy voice.

"About what?"

"I almost had that Princess the other day. Mother Capella left me a note telling me exactly where she was. I went after her but then this strange woman stopped me."

"Wait. Stopped *you*?" Meili said in disbelief.

Elsa nodded. "The woman had a strange power. She just... healed her wounds instantly. Like Mother could do."

Meili's eyes widened. "Well... Damn. If she's like Mother then you *don't* want to fight her!" Meili said firmly.

Elsa shrugged. "I know. But this is the second time that I let the Princess slip through my fingers. If I don't find her soon..." She said in a vague voice.

Meili gave Elsa a worried look. Over the past few months, Elsa had seemed more and more disconnected from everything. She was as efficient a killer as ever but her emotions and moods had become... muted by Mother's regular magical rituals. Now she was discussing her own slow and torturous death in a tone of utter disinterest.

Meili bit her lip. "Look, Big Sis, you're already on thin ice with Mother," Meili reminded her. "Last month after you failed to make your kill in the Lagunican capitol because of the Sword Saint, she was terribly angry with you. Remember how she changed you into a spotted toad and put you into a maze full of grass snakes?"

Elsa nodded. "She told me that if I could escape the snakes and find the end of the maze, she'd turn me back. Otherwise, the snakes would eat me," Elsa said very matter-of-fact. "I escaped but Mother pretended not to notice at first. She ignored me, hoping that the snakes would pick up my trail and follow me out to eat me. Finally, she got bored and changed me back. I don't even want to think about what Mother will do to me if I fail her again," Elsa finished, sounding bemused.

Meili nodded. "I get why you're worried, Big Sis. But now that I'm here, we can use my pets to track the Princess down. Tomorrow, we'll get her scent and we can follow her to wherever hole she's hiding in. She'll be dead before Mother loses her temper."

Elsa thought for a moment. "Maybe we should start tonight," Elsa murmured vaguely. "I feel like I'm living on borrowed time..."

Meili shrugged. "Whatever you want, Big Sis."

"Your time is up!" A scratchy voice shouted.

The girls both leaped to their feet as a short, blond girl stepped into the firelight. She was wearing a skintight black outfit that left her shoulders bare. She wore tights, a flashy, red half-skirt, and a black bodice. Her eyes were red and they blazed with a

lunatic zeal. The mabeasts all around the camp whimpered at the newcomer and they quickly crept backwards.

Elsa looked worried now. Capella's presence was frightening enough to cut through her bemused numbness. "Hello, Mother," She whispered.

"Elsa," Capella said reflectively. "Why did I think you could do this? This *one* simple thing? I give you a chance to make your beloved Mother happy and *what* do you do?"

"We... can still find the Princess, Mother," Meili whispered, trembling.

"I was *not* talking to you!" Capella screamed, pointing at Meili. Meili flinched and leaped behind Elsa, shivering violently.

Capella face-palmed with a moan. "All you had to do was kill that faggot and his elf-slut and you couldn't even do *that* properly," Capella sighed in resignation.

"Who?" Elsa said in confusion. "Mother, you never mentioned wanting me to kill an elf-"

"Instead," Capella snarled, clearly not listening to a word Elsa said, "*I* had to kill the elf-slut personally because you couldn't be bothered to kill her! You were trying to kill the princess!"

"Mother," Elsa whispered, knowing how dire it would be to contradict Capella but knowing that she had no good options anyway. "You told me to kill the princess. I was trying to do what you said and make you happy. Because... I love you so much..." She said vaguely.

Capella closed her eyes and took a deep, slow breath. "You realize that it's a big world out there. There are *thousands* of sad and lonely little children all across this continent who lie awake at night, dreaming of my love. But I choose to open my heart to you. And all I ask in return is that you suffer and sacrifice for my happiness because I fucking *deserve* all of the happiness in the fucking world!" She hissed. "But you're too selfish, aren't you? My love isn't enough for you. It's never enough. You've both very *bad* little girls and bad little girls need to be punished!"

Any faint hope Elsa had of talking Capella down vanished. Elsa's mind was had been wrapped in a protective numbness for weeks but the thought of Meili dying enabled her to shake out of the fog.

Elsa drew her daggers. "Meili! Run!" She shouted, diving at Capella.

Elsa knew that she was dead. She had no more hope of wounding Mother than a kitten attacking a dragon but if she could distract Mother for a few minutes, maybe she could buy Meili enough time to escape.

It was nice to think so anyway.

Meili leaped onto her Guiltylowe and the beast bolted out of the clearing and into the dark forest, followed by her other mabeasts.

Elsa slammed her daggers into Capella forehead and buried them up to the hilt.

For a moment, Elsa wondered if maybe she had managed to hurt Capella but then the little blond girl flashed Elsa a lunatic grin.

The next thing Elsa knew, she was flying backwards, her chest in searing pain.

Elsa crashed through the underbrush, hitting the ground hard. She tried to rise to her knees but her chest felt like it had been crushed.

Mother must have broken a few ribs... Elsa thought as Capella strolled over to her with a feverish smile.

I'm so sorry, Big Sis! Meili wailed in her mind as she fled through the dense underbrush. I don't want to leave you but there's nothing I can do! Mother will rip me apart. I'm sorry, Big Sis! I can't help! If I stay, I'm just going to die! I'm so, so sorry!

Meili's mind echoed with guilt and self-loathing as she abandoned the person dearest to her in all the world and fled into the inky night.

"Bad girl," Capella hissed, pulling the long knives out of her forehead with all the care and attention a normal person would pay to removing a thorn stuck in their shirt sleeve. "Trying to hurt Mama?! Oh. Bad girls need to be punished."

The enormous gash in Capella's forehead quickly knitted shut. "All the love that I wasted on you!" Capella shouted in fury. "I, the immortal, captivating, sensuous, mysterious, beautiful..." Capella groped for another adjective.

"Humble," Subaru said calmly, stepping into the firelight behind Capella. "You forgot 'humble.'"

Meili, mounted on her Guiltylowe crashed through the underbrush without any clear idea where she was going as long as it was away from Mother.

Suddenly Meili realized that she was flying and she heard the Guiltylowe roar.

Meili decided that her pet must have stepped into a gopher hole or something similar and stumbled and now Meili found herself crashing and rolling down a steep ridge.

Meili crashed down hard on the path below. She shook her head and groggily got to her knees.

Her eyes widened as she saw huge claws charging right at her.

At the last moment, the claws swerved aside.

"Meili?!" A voice shouted in disbelief.

Meili blinked and her eyes slowly adjusted. The claws belonged to a black riding dragon and a hooded man rode on top of it.

"Meili, what the hell are you *doing* here?!"

Meili started at being addressed by name by the stranger but she had no time to wonder about that. She needed to get out of here or she'd die alongside her Big Sis.

Big Sis is sacrificing her life to give me a chance to escape. I have to get away. I have to.

But how?

Meili hesitated and as she did, she saw the man pull back his hood.

Meili's jaw dropped. It was Subaru Natsuki, the goofball she'd known in Arlem who somehow had the power to slay a troll with a single blow. "Meili, what's going on? What are you doing way out here?"

Meili very much wanted to ask him the same question but there was no time for that. Meili remembered the Gusteko attack at Arlem.

A desperate hope lit up in her heart. *If he can distract Mother, maybe Elsa and I can get away!*

"Subaru!" She shouted, quickly getting to her feet and mentally ordering her mabeasts back before he saw them. "My sister is being attacked!"

Capella slowly turned around to look at Subaru.

Elsa could barely move and her hood obscured her vision. She'd gotten to her hands and knees but that was all she was capable of. She barely swallowed a scream when she felt Meili slide into her and hold her close, jostling her broken bones.

Capella stared at Subaru in disbelief. "What the fuck are you doing here?" She asked almost politely.

"I was looking for a five copper whore," Subaru replied in a similar voice. "Lucky I ran into you, huh?"

Capella smiled up at Subaru. "How's your little tramp?" She cooed. "I'm sure her death was just terrible."

Subaru's face darkened. "Her death?" He repeated.

"Yes. I heard all about that curse."

"Hm. How did you hear about that?" Subaru asked distantly.

Capella flashed him a lunatic grin and burst out in laughter. "Because I'm the one who cursed her, you stupid faggot!"

Capella laughed uproariously. Her shrieks of maniacal laughter echoed all through the forest.

Subaru stood there patiently with a dead face and glittering eyes, waiting for Capella to finish.

Finally Capella regained control and she sneered at Subaru, "What did it feel like, burying your little slut?"

"Oh, she's not dead. She's actually doing fine," Subaru replied. "It turns out that your curses are almost as potent as your cleavage."

Capella's jaw dropped and her eyes glittered dangerously.

Elsa had absolutely no idea what the hell was going on or who this stranger was. She was just grateful to have been at least temporarily dismissed from Mother's attention.

"So," Capella whispered in a friendly voice that sent a shiver down Meili's spine. Meili knew that Mother only talked like this when she was seconds away from losing all control and ripping someone to pieces. "What brings you out here tonight, Pride?"

"Well, I found your letter. Honestly, I'm almost embarrassed I didn't realize that you were the author. Nobody else in the world talks like you. I came out there just hoping to pick up some information," Subaru muttered. "But I was lucky enough to run into you and I thought maybe you could give me something."

"I'm not really about giving, Pride," Capella said sweetly. "I deserve everything in the world so everything should come to *me*. 'Giving' is a violation of the natural order."

Subaru ignored her. "The medicine I made is working OK on my wife but I think it would be much faster if you'd just give me the antidote."

Capella's fake smile twisted into a very nasty grin. "There *is* no antidote, you chunky fuck!"

"Oh. Huh," Subaru mused. "Then I guess all I can really get from you is an outlet to vent my frustration."

"You can't kill me, Pride," Capella taunted. "I'm immortal."

Subaru shrugged. "I guess I'll just have to settle for making you hurt then."

Faster than Meili's eyes could follow, Capella shaped her arms into two great sickles and slashed at the Subaru's throat like a praying mantis.

But Subaru had been replaced by some shadowy silhouette and Capella's blow didn't seem to affect him at all. Her blades almost seemed to bounce off his neck.

A violent wind kicked up and the stranger was the heart of it. The campfire went out like a candle and the clearing became very dark and very cold.

Subaru grabbed Capella's head and held on tight.

Capella gave a strangled squeal and tried to jump back but Subaru's grip was iron and her body was moving in jerky, staccato motions. Her blade arms were suddenly looking... lumpy, like old modeling clay.

"Get off me!" Capella screamed, shaking her head violently. Her voice sounded as if she was talking through a mouthful of jelly.

She couldn't shake the stranger off until she pulled up her leg and kicked him violently in the chest, knocking him back a few steps.

"Wow!" The stranger said in a reluctantly impressed voice that was deep as the sea. "You taste great, Capella! I've never gotten that much mana from anyone! I take back what I said earlier. You're totally worth six coppers."

Capella shook her head violently. She looked nauseous. She took a deep breath and her body returned to its normal shape and coloring, no longer looking like a rough clay-figurine of the Sin Archbishop. "What the fuck did you just do to me?" She screamed in outrage.

Meili shook her head. *I've never heard Mother sound like that before. I bet Mother has never been this furious but I think that maybe she's scared too.*

Subaru laughed. It was a cold inhuman sound. "Just helping myself to a little snack," He said, marching over to Capella. "And I want more!"

Capella flinched backwards. Meili had never seen her flinch before.

Capella's hand grew claws six inches long and she slashed at him but the stranger dodged effortlessly.

He was moving much faster and more fluidly than he had been before while Capella seemed to be staggering. Her movements were sluggish and her shape-shifting was happening in slow-motion. Subaru dodged her every blow by inches, his darkness reducing him to flickering image as he danced around Capella's flailing limbs. His movements reminded Meili of Big Sis. When Elsa felt that she was truly out of her foe's league, she would sometimes amuse herself by dodging or sidestepping by no more than a hair to drill it into her foe just how outclassed they were before finishing the job.

Subaru kept grabbing Capella and holding on tight. Each time Capella gave a squawk of protest and fought to break his grip. Each time, her movements slowed and her body grew more rough and poorly shaped like a child's model made of play-dough.

Capella's body was now lumpy and cumbersome. She staggered as if drunk. She swung at Subaru and Subaru sidestepped, slipping under her guard. Subaru punched her square in the chest and her chest and stomach blew out the back of her body, leaving her head and limbs standing there incongruously on a hollowed out torso.

Capella could only stare at the gaping hole in her torso in disbelief. Her severed parts had liquefied and were coming back to her body but they came slowly, rolling and crawling along ponderously like molasses on an icy morning.

Subaru grabbed her throat.

Capella squealed and fought to pry off his hands but the stranger held on tight. Capella tried to push him away but she seemed exhausted. She staggered and fell down on her back, gasping for breath.

Her severed pieces finally rejoined her body but she just lay there panting.

The Subaru's shadow disappeared and the cold wind faded. He looked at Capella with a huge smile. "Delicious," He smirked.

Capella coughed. "What did... you do to me... faggot?" She whispered.

"Weird. I'm surprised you're still alive. I mean, I *wanted* to question you," Subaru said casually. "But I kinda lost control there and nearly drained you to the dregs. Everyone else I drained that low turned into a dessicated corpse. Not you though."

Capella looked like she was struggling to move. She could barely lift her head but she glared at Subaru venomously. "I'm... immortal," She spat.

"Anyway, I have other things to do so why don't you tell me how you cursed Emilia so we can get this over with?" Subaru asked.

Capella struggled to gather the breath to answer. "I fed her some of my blood," She whispered.

Subaru scowled. "Damn, Capella. Everything about you is poisonous! I thought it was just your fashion sense!"

"Fuck you," Capella whispered.

"So how do I cure it?"

"There is no cure! It's Black Dragon Blood!" Capella spat, fighting to sit up. It took her three tries but she ultimately succeeded.

Subaru frowned down at her. "Huh. You're the first person who managed to get up after I drained them."

Capella hissed at him through clenched teeth. "You're dead, Pride. You're dead." A pair of black, feathery wings slowly sprouted from Capella's shoulders and her voice gained strength. "You're fucking *dead*!" Capella shot straight up into the air.

Subaru dashed toward her but it was too late. She flew over the trees and was gone.

"Well, shit," Subaru muttered.

Meili stared in amazement as Mother actually *ran away*.

Elsa groaned in pain as she lay in Meili's lap.

"Meili."

Meili started and saw Subaru looking down at her.

"Is this your sister?" He asked. "I didn't even know you *had* a sister!"

Meili nodded. "Thank you so much, Subaru," Meili murmured.

"Are you alright?" Subaru asked.

Elsa wheezed. "I think Mother broke my ribs!" She gasped.

Meili bit her lip. "We'll find you a healer!" She promised.

"Good luck," Subaru grumbled. "They're hard to find around here. The competent ones anyway. Is there anyplace nearby you two can stay?"

Meili shook her head. "We need to run before Mother comes back!" Meili said.

Subaru made a face. "I know what that's like," He murmured. "It's tough being on the run..."

Elsa fought to get off her hands and knees to no avail. Every movement felt like the bone fragments in her chest were sawing into her body.

Meili helplessly held her sister as she gasped and wheezed in pain.

Meili looked up to ask Subaru for help and noticed that his face was frozen in a mask of indecision.

Finally, he sighed. "Alright, Meili," He grumbled, pulling a small blue bottle out of his robe. "You owe me *big* for this but you and your sister need to clear out before she comes looking for you again."

Subaru knelt down beside the girl and the hooded woman and poured the blue liquid on her sizable chest.

Her chest glowed blue for a moment and then her breathing calmed.

"Big Sis?" Meili asked.

Elsa looked at Meili in disbelief. "I feel great!" She exclaimed in wonder. "I haven't felt this good in years! I almost feel like..." She trailed off.

Subaru stood up. "Yeah, great," He muttered. "Sit still for a few minutes while your body knits itself back together. Look, let's back up a little here. Meili, what are you doing way out here? And why was Capella after you two? I didn't even know you had a sister. I thought you said you were an orphan."

Meili hesitated. Normally she would have had a plausible story all lined up to hand her benefactors but this had been a most stressful night and she found herself flailing for ideas. Worse, no matter how she thought about it, there was really no way to explain them being way out here and Mother coming after them in any way that made sense.

As she so often did when she was conflicted, she fell back on Big Sis's lessons.

An unpleasant truth is always better than an unbelievable lie.

Elsa sat there silently. She didn't know Subaru or how to manipulate him but she trusted Meili to play things to their best advantage.

"OK," Meili said slowly. "You just saved our lives, Subaru, so... I'll level with you."

Subaru blinked. Meili wasn't acting like the shy, little girl he remembered. As Subaru watched, her voice and eyes had grown harder as if she had just stepped out of a character she'd been playing. She almost reminded him of Felt.

"Big Sis and I used to work for Mother," Meili said, deciding that it would be best to make the relationship sound further past tense than it really was.

"Mother?"

Meili snorted. "That charming lady you just chased away," Meili explained.

Subaru's eyes bulged out. "You worked for *Capella*?! You're Witch Cultists?!"

Meili blinked. "Witch Cultists?" She asked in confusion. "What the heck does the Witch Cult have to do with anything?"

Subaru stared at her for a moment. "Your 'Mother' is a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult."

This time it was Meili's eyes that bulged out. "*What?!*"

Subaru frowned. "You really didn't know?"

Meili shook her head and glanced at Elsa. Elsa still had her hood pulled low but she was sitting up now and no longer seemed to be in pain. Elsa gave Meili an equivalent head shake.

"Nah. That's news to us. Although, it would explain a lot," Meili admitted.

Subaru made a face. "Then... what did you do for her?"

"Well... We killed people," Meili said matter-of-fact.

Subaru's jaw dropped. "What?!"

Meili shrugged. "Come on, Subaru, it's not like it was our idea, OK? Mother would tell us to do stuff and we'd run out and do it. She usually told us to steal things for her or to kill people."

"Why would you do *any* of that for Capella?!"

"Huh? Is 'Capella' what you call Mother?" Meili asked curiously.

"Yes. Her name is Capella," Subaru said impatiently. "Why do you call her 'Mother?'"

"Uh, because she said she'd kill us if we didn't?" Meili said incredulously. "We didn't exactly *volunteer* to work for Mother, you know! She doesn't have recruitment drives. She kidnaps and tortures people and then she uses us to do jobs for her until we died on the job or failed a mission. And after that she'd destroy us in a bunch of horrible ways just for a laugh!"

Subaru hesitated, digesting that. "Why were you in Arlem?"

"I don't know."

Subaru looked at her skeptically.

Meili threw up her arms. "I *don't* know!" She said helplessly. "Mother told me to go there and put on my cute, innocent, orphan routine and then wait for further instructions. I never got any. I just spent a few months being chased around the village by Lucas and Petra and then Mother sent Big Sis to pull me out of there. I never even did anything while I was there."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Where you one of the people looking for the Princess?"

This conversation isn't going anywhere good now. I doubt he'd believe a lie though after he managed to find us out here... "Well, I was supposed to start looking for her tomorrow along with Big Sis but I guess Mother ran out of patience," She muttered.

Subaru glared at her.

"What?" Meili protested. "What should I have done? Told Mother I didn't feel like killing this Princess cause she never did anything bad to me? Can you even *begin* to imagine what Mother would have done to me if I'd refused her orders?!"

Subaru's face calmed a little. "I have an idea of what she'd do," He admitted.

"See? Big Sis and I don't want to kill people," Meili said, knowing this wasn't entirely true. "We just... never had a choice."

Subaru scratched his chin. "OK, so now what? You guys have a place to hide?"

"Not really," Meili admitted. "The only places to hide we know about are the spots where Mother's other children group up to do jobs."

"Other children?" Subaru echoed. "There are more of you?"

"Lots more," Meili answered. "I have no idea how many though."

Subaru made a face. "Well, I don't have many ideas for you. Maybe you could go back to Arlem? They'd probably take you in again."

"That won't work," Elsa said, slowly getting to her feet.

Subaru frowned. Meili's sister's voice sounded familiar. "What do you mean?"

"Mother always finds us," Elsa whispered.

Meili nodded. "No one has ever escaped Mother and lived to tell it. There's a rumor that Mother has a magic book that tells her wherever her children are located."

"A magic book?" Subaru asked.

Elsa nodded. "It's just a rumor but I can personally vouch for the fact that no one who has tried to run away from Mother has ever survived. She drags them back and makes us watch her slowly reduce them to something unspeakable."

Subaru frowned. "Well... that complicates things..."

"It does," Elsa agreed. "So I was wondering if we might be able to reach another agreement."

"What sort of agreement?"

Meili could guess what her Big Sis was thinking. "Need a couple of killers?" Meili asked brightly.

Subaru's jaw dropped. "What the hell is *wrong* with you two?!"

"Well, being trained by Mother didn't help," Meili admitted. "But Big Sis has a point. Escaping from Mother doesn't seem to be a realistic possibility. So our best bet would be to seek employment with someone that Mother is scared of."

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "I don't know if I'd say she's *scared* of me," Subaru replied.

"Well, I would," Meili replied. "I've never heard her sound like that. And I never even imagined her running away from anybody."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Why would I need hired killers?" Subaru asked dubiously. "I'm way stronger than both of you combined."

"But we have abilities you don't!" Meili broke in.

"Such as?" Subaru asked, crossing his arms.

Meili smirked.

Subaru turned his head as he heard branches snapping in the woods. Then he saw red eyes moving deep in the shadows. A pack of wolgarm, a Guiltylowe, as well as a group of possum and bat-like monsters appeared. In moments, the woods were swarming with small and medium sized mabeasts.

"I don't think you ever met my pets," Meili said sweetly.

"No," Subaru said calmly, marching right up to the Guiltylowe and inspecting it closely. "I don't think I did. You can control mabeasts?"

Meili frowned. *What is he doing?* She wondered. *Is Subaru really stupid enough to walk right up to a monster that could rip his head off in one bite? Does he really trust me that much to control them? Does he really trust me that much period?*

Maybe this isn't a good idea after all. This guy is an idiot. He's looking at that Guiltylowe like he expects it to heel.

Meili frowned and looked more closely at her favorite beast. To her shock, the great mabeast's head was down and its expression was sullen. Normally a person getting this close to a Guiltylowe would have been ripped to shreds or it would have taken all of Meili's powers of persuasion to restrain it. This Guiltylowe seemed to be fighting to look anywhere except at Subaru.

Subaru walked around the mabeasts, inspecting them. "Where the hell did you get a Guiltylowe?"

"I found him."

Ask a dumb question, Subaru thought with a sigh. "I mean, how are you controlling it?"

"I don't know. I was raised by mabeasts."

"You've got to be joking."

"No!" Meili said pertly. "I've lived with the mabeasts all my life. Honestly, I like them better than most people. Then Mother sent Big Sis to find me and bring me back a few years ago so that she could teach me how to be human."

Subaru barked a laugh. "Oh, yeah. Capella, the ultimate judge of how to be human!"

Meili shrugged. "No argument here. Look, I can't fight myself," Meili admitted. "But my pets will rip anyone I point them at to shreds so I'll be fine dealing with whomever you want killed."

"Impressive," Subaru said in a 'good try, little girl' kind of voice.

Meili's jaw dropped in disbelief but before she could respond, something caught her attention.

Meili's Divine Blessing allowed her to not only control mabeasts but also to share their thoughts and senses to an extent. And what she was picking up right now was making her feel increasingly unsettled.

Meili had only seen this reaction a few times before but she instantly recognized it: the mabeasts were *afraid*.

Something is very wrong here, Meili thought. *It takes a very special kind of monster to make a Guiltylowe feel nervous. They never even treated Mother like this.*

The mabeasts were all glaring at Subaru but rather than closing in on him they seemed more to be debating whether to attack or run for their lives.

Meili's Guiltylowe, which was an apex predator in nearly any environment, was behaving unrealistically submissive right now. Instead of growling at Subaru who was right up in its face, it looked away and gave a faint whimper. Something about Subaru was making the monster feel off-balance.

Her Guiltylowe looked at Subaru with the kind of reluctant respect and deference that such an able predator reserves only for far superior ones. Meili had only seen such a

reaction in her favorite monster when the Guiltylowe had been forced into close contact with an overwhelmingly powerful mabeast such as a Snow Blight or a Shadow Weaver.

Something about Subaru had triggered an impulse in the Guiltylowe that said: 'Submit.' Some instinct buried deep in its psyche was warning the mabeast that attacking this man, even in self-defense, would be a *big* mistake.

"I'm rather good myself," Elsa added, her voice sounding more animated than Meili had heard in months. "I'm an excellent fighter."

Subaru's head snapped around and he stared intently at Elsa.

Meili felt her mouth run dry.

"You sound familiar," Subaru whispered, trying to peer at her face under her hood.

He knows Big Sis! That can't be good!

Elsa and Meili shared a long, worried look and then Elsa slowly pulled back her hood.

Subaru recoiled, his eyes bulging out comically. "*Elsa?!!*"

Elsa tried to moisten her lips. "Have... we met?"

Subaru looked both aghast and annoyed. "So... you don't even *remember* our last encounter!"

Elsa thought for a moment and then shook her head. "No. I'm afraid not," Elsa said tentatively.

Subaru looked very annoyed. "Yeah. I guess with all the people you kill, all the lives you've destroyed, it's really hard to keep track of the wreckage you leave behind!" He said in an overly bright tone. Subaru took a deep breath and then ground his teeth. "Congratulations, Elsa! Now I'm *royally* pissed off!" He snapped.

Subaru started to march toward Elsa but Meili jumped in front of her. "Wait! Big Sis didn't kill people because she wanted to! Mother made her!"

Not entirely true but he might believe it!

Subaru looked at her incredulously. "Meili! Your 'Big Sister' is a psychotic serial-killer! She's wiped out whole villages!"

"Only because Mother made her!"

"She likes to torture people!" Subaru snapped back. "She does it for fun!"

Meili shook her head violently. "No! Big Sis only did bad things when Mother made her!"

"It's actually not that cut and dry," Elsa said calmly.

Meili's eyes bugged out. *What is she doing?!*

Then Meili noticed that Subaru was frowning at her but he was at least listening for the moment.

Elsa took a moment and considered her words, knowing full well that they might be her last. "The violence wasn't... *entirely* my fault. I can show you."

Subaru glowered at her. "Elsa, you nearly cut me in half and you tried to kill my wife. I am literally *this* close," Subaru held his fingers an inch apart, "To smashing you into dust so whatever you're going to say, make it fast."

Elsa nodded and brought her hands to the top of her extremely revealing gown.

Subaru's jaw dropped as Elsa opened a clasp and her dress fell off. Elsa stood there naked except for her tights.

"Whoah!" Subaru jumped back and turned his head away. "That is *not* helping your case! I just told you, I'm married!"

"I'm not trying to entice you," Elsa said calmly. "I always had a rule about not selling my body. But if you'll only let us live if we both pleasure you then, of course, that's on the table as well." Her voice was matter-of-fact.

Subaru looked aghast.

"There's something I'd like to show you, if you think could stand to look at me for a moment," Elsa said calmly.

Subaru sighed and reluctantly looked at the mostly naked Elsa.

He frowned. Elsa's beautiful, pale skin was marred in dozens of places by tiny scars and each one was perfectly straight and identical in length as if someone had drawn them all over her body.

"What are those?" Subaru asked, pointing at the scars.

Elsa sighed. "Mother has a special art that allows her to empower her children temporarily. She calls them 'corpse dolls.' When Mother needed me to fight and kill someone too tough for me, she carved their name on my body in runes. This has the effect of rendering me immortal until the target dies but I was also incapable of doing anything *but* killing everyone who came across me until the target was dead."

Subaru frowned, considering that. "Bullshit. I don't buy it. That's way too powerful a trick to exist. It makes you immortal?"

"There are caveats," Elsa admitted. "Each time you die during the job you will come back but each time you give up a bit more of your mind and soul. Normally, after the doll kills their target they turn to cinders and die as well. Somehow, I was able to bypass that. Mother never figured out why but I survived being a corpse doll. So she kept using me as one. I survived each job but each one cost me something as well. Every time I became a curse doll, a little piece of me perished. It became... harder to feel any emotions except for the ones caused by violence. When I was sent out to kill people, I took my time with it. It was the only way I could feel pleasure anymore..."

Subaru sneered at her. "Is that your excuse?" He asked in disgust. "You tortured people because it made you *feel* good?!"

"It was *all* I could feel," Elsa continued calmly. "For years all I was able to feel was a longing for violence and pain. I felt more dead than alive until today."

"Why, what happened today?" Subaru grumbled.

Elsa took a deep breath. "What was in that blue vial?" Elsa whispered fervently.

Subaru's eyes narrowed.

"I don't know how to explain it," Elsa murmured. "But that potion... it made me feel alive again. I haven't felt this... human in years. Could I buy any more from you?"

Subaru snorted. "You have *no* idea how expensive that potion was. I spent it to heal 'Meili's Sister' and *boy*, do I regret it now!"

Meili frowned and thought for a long moment then her eyes brightened. "Subaru!"

Subaru sighed and looked at her.

"You didn't know that Mother would be here tonight, did you?" Meili pressed.

"I knew that 'Mother' would be here," He disagreed. "I just didn't know *who* that was."

"Then why did you come out yourself?!" Meili asked excitedly. "Why come all the way out here if you thought you would only be dealing with a couple of flunkies? You didn't send your minions because you don't *have* any or at least none that you trust to handle combat!"

Meili was guessing but something in Subaru's expression told her that she was guessing right. "If you take us on, you'll have minions that can handle dangerous situations and if we end up getting killed, you don't have to care because you don't like us anyway!"

Subaru frowned.

He's considering it! Meili thought in exaltation.

Subaru snorted. "Why," He said. "Would I *ever* trust you to do what I said?"

"Because you'll *kill* us if we don't," Elsa said very matter-of-fact.

Subaru hesitated a moment. "Yeah. Or you'll just run back to Capella and make me waste a whole lot of time hunting you down."

Meili hesitated a second. "Actually, Boss, could you do us a favor? Promise that you'll either hire us or kill us. Just promise that you won't send us away."

Subaru frowned. He looked confused for a moment and then snorted. "Reverse psychology, Meili. Brilliant. I'm very impressed. Tell me, did this work on Petra cause even she looks old enough to see through it!"

"It's not a trick!" Meili assured him. "You have *no* idea what Mother would do to us! She's already marked us for death. You heard that yourself. And now she'll blame us for her losing that fight with you!"

Subaru blinked. "Blame *you*? How does that work? You two would have been lunch if you'd jumped into that fight!"

"Yeah, no kidding. But *somebody* needs to be blamed for Mother's humiliation," Meili said matter-of-fact. "And it sure won't be Mother! If Mother ever got her hands on us, she'd torture us to death in ways you can't imagine. Our only hope to stay alive is to stay close to someone that Mother is afraid to fight. That means you're our only option. If we piss you off, we're as good as dead."

Subaru was silent for a moment. "Ah. So that's your argument. I should feel confident in using you because I can kill you whenever I want. And if you *do* run away, Capella will kill you for me. Does that about sum it up?"

"Sounds like a reasonable foundation for a business relationship to me," Elsa said with a shrug.

Subaru scowled at her. *Hire these freaks? That would have to be the dumbest idea in history! Elsa is a psychotic killer and Meili has been lying to me since the day we met! I don't trust these two as far as I could throw them!*

It's not a dumb idea at all, A cold voice whispered in his mind. 'Trust' is a concept that belongs in relationships with friends and lovers. Assets aren't trusted, you can depend on them because you have leverage over them.

In this case, Elsa is correct. You have the perfect leverage over her and Meili. If she angers you, her choices are to bare her neck to you and let you kill her quickly or run away and let Capella catch her and kill her slowly. And it seems quite safe to assume that Capella would do things to her that you could never dream of.

You need muscle for your plans. They can provide it. And as long as they're obedient, you will protect them. It's a solid foundation for an alliance.

Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Alright. I do need minions, I guess. You can work for me as long as you're obedient," Subaru said finally.

"Awesome!" Meili cheered.

"Fair warning, Elsa," Subaru murmured, holding up a finger. "I *do* hate you. I'll very likely to kill you at some point if you do anything to piss me off," He said matter-of-fact. "But if you behave yourself, then I'll at least make it quick when I do."

Meili looked horrified but Elsa just shrugged. "That's a better offer than I got from Mother."

Subaru walked over to Elsa completely without fear. *I don't even need Indomitable right now. I'm pretty sure with all the mana I've stolen from Capella just now, I'm probably faster and stronger than Elsa if it comes down to it.*

Now I get to do one more thing I don't want to do...

Subaru reached into his pocket and pulled out about thirty gold coins. "Here."

Elsa took them. "What are these for?"

Subaru scowled. "You're my 'minions' now," He said in a disgusted voice. "And I take care of my 'minions' whether I like them or not... Use the money to get a room at the Stoneybrooke inn."

At the Stoneybrooke inn, they'll be close enough to watch but not too close.

Elsa and Meili both stared at him in astonishment.

Subaru made a face. "What is it?" Subaru growled.

Elsa and Meili looked at each other. "No one ever gave us money for a room before," Elsa admitted.

Subaru squinted at them. "You traveled around the world killing people. Where did you stay?"

"Forests, abandoned buildings, caves, empty houses," Elsa listed off.

Subaru squinted at them. "Did you guys not get paid very well? I always assumed you were really expensive."

Elsa shook her head. "We didn't get paid at all. Our jobs might have cost a lot of gold but we had to give it all to Mother. It was a sign of our devotion to her."

Subaru frowned. "How did you survive?"

Meili shrugged. "Well, when we were back at headquarters, we had food to eat and places to sleep. Although, Mother made me sleep in a kennel," She said matter-of-fact. "When we were on a job, we were limited to whatever we could steal."

Subaru snorted. "You know, the more I hear about Capella, the more I like her," He said sarcastically.

Meili snorted. "That's an understatement. You know she used to torture us for fun? She turned me into a swarm of frogs once!" Meili shuddered.

"A swarm of frogs?" Subaru repeated.

Meili nodded. "Twelve or... fourteen, I think. It was horrible! Feeling split out into all those different bodies! It felt so wrong. I was desperate to put myself back together but I couldn't. Mother made me wait for hours before she changed me back."

Subaru blinked and his face grew sick. "Why would she *do* that?!"

Meili shrugged. "She wanted to teach me what would happen if I disappointed her."

Subaru made a face. *Gee. Maybe working for me is a major step up for them. Even with the threat of me killing Elsa.*

Subaru didn't answer right away. "OK. I think that killing Capella is climbing on my TODO list for a whole host of reasons. Or at least chaining her down so she can't hurt anyone anymore."

"I can't say that I'd be unhappy to see it," Elsa commented.

Subaru looked up at Elsa and gave her an awkward nod. *Still not sure how to feel about me employing Elsa... But I am sure that I can handle her now. She's like a mosquito to me.*

"Alright," Subaru growled. "A couple of rules while you work for me. First of all, avoid drawing attention. You're going to be staying in Stoneybrooke for a bit."

"How do you want us to engage with the people there?" Meili asked.

Subaru thought for a moment and then shrugged. "The people in that village are all absolute garbage. I don't care what you do to *any* of them but don't attract attention!"

OK. I just gave Elsa carte blanche to kill whoever she wants. And I actually don't feel guilty about it in the slightest because the locals tried to kill me and Emilia.

This is not normal for me. I think I need a long vacation to decompress after I sort this mess with Emilia out...

Elsa and Meili nodded.

"Second, the elf and the... princess," Subaru added grudgingly. "That you met belong to me. Unlike Capella, I am *very* protective of my minions and my assets. Lay a *finger* on them and I'll make you both wish that it was Capella that got you. Understand?"

Elsa squinted at him. "I understand the instruction. I *will* follow it. But for the record, you'd have to work really hard for your punishments to be scarier than Mother's. She-"

Subaru cut her off. "Capella is a stupid and vapid slacker," Subaru said pleasantly. He walked right up into Elsa's face. "Yes, she *is* a sadist. But she lacks drive, ambition, and brains. I have all three in spades. Trust me, if I decide that I *really* want to hurt you, I'll make sure it really opens your mind to the possibilities. What I lack in sadism, I make up for in imagination. Any questions?"

Elsa and Meili swallowed hard and they both shook their heads fervently.

Subaru snorted. "Alright. Go get settled in. Meet me at the Siros/Sanshi border tomorrow at sunrise where the road fords the river." Subaru glanced at Elsa's naked breasts and then looked away with a flush. "And please put your dress back on!"

Elsa nodded and pulled up her dress.

Subaru sighed. "See you tomorrow," He grumbled to them as he walked away.

You balanced that very well, A cold voice whispered. As much as you would love to see Elsa writhing in agony, the needs of your plans must come before personal satisfaction.

Moreover, she is now sworn into your service and this is a sacred trust. She is bound to serve and obey and you are obliged to nurture and defend.

Until she should be defiant to your wishes, your honor depends on upholding this bond.

Still, should she make such an error in judgment as to disobey you, then she must suffer as no man has ever suffered before.

No ruler can long stand if his vassals may break bonds of faith with impunity. Her offer of fealty being accepted, now she must serve. She will serve you as a retainer or she will serve you as an example but serve she must and serve she shall.

Subaru blinked. *Huh. Those are some weird thoughts. When did I develop an opinion on noblesse oblige?*

Alright. If Elsa and Meili come to the border tomorrow then maybe I can trust them. A little.

If they don't, then at least they'll be smart enough to run for their lives and they won't be threatening Emilia and Anri anymore.

In that case, I can hunt them down and slaughter them later when time permits.

If I'm going to murder Elsa, I really don't want to rush it...

On a related note, even if Emilia is still up when I get home, I think I'd better keep tonight's activities to myself. I can only imagine Emilia and Anri's reaction if I told them that I hired Elsa.

Early the next morning, Subaru and Patrasche found themselves sitting in the rocky hills of western Sanshi. The area was dry and cold. The road leading up into the mountains was a rough dirt and gravel path.

Subaru had come back to the House last night after both Emilia and Anri were asleep and he'd sneaked out this morning before either had woken up.

Rather than wake anyone up, Subaru had just left a note advising them that he wouldn't be home until tonight.

Subaru had bound Meili's mabeasts to him last night and he discovered that he could sense them faintly as they approached. When they got close enough, Subaru mentally snapped an order and they raced over to him.

Meili and Elsa were riding on top of a Guiltylowe. Meili's face was shocked as the mabeasts had simply taken independent action to rush over here in defiance of her instructions.

She noticed Subaru waiting for her, leaning back against Patrasche, and she nodded in understanding.

Subaru looked over Meili's pack. He hadn't had a chance to inspect it very closely last night. There were a lot of mabeasts but there was only one Guiltylowe and a small pack of wolgarm. Aside from that, there were a variety of small winged and ground mabeasts that Subaru didn't recognize. None of these could be considered threats without an overwhelming advantage of numbers.

I need to do something about this. Meili won't be very useful if these weak mabeasts are her only backup.

"Hello, Master," Elsa said calmly, sliding off the mabeast. Meili reminded mounted, her arms wrapped around her feline steed. "So what are we doing here?"

Subaru thought for a moment. "Meili, get your mabeasts off the road so that nobody sees them," He directed. Meili gestured and the mabeasts slowly moved into the rocky hills where Subaru waited. "So, I want to reverse the fortunes of the Gusteko civil war but I don't want to attack the army directly. It's too risky. I just want to make sure that the soldiers don't get their supplies."

Meili frowned, puzzling her way through that. "I... don't get it," She confessed.

"We don't need to 'get it,'" Elsa reminded her.

Meili looked sullen.

"We don't need to fight the army," Subaru explained, ignoring Elsa. "We just need to make sure that they don't get their supplies. They can't fight without supplies and then the army will collapse. We're going to attack the supply wagons that pass by here. These wagons leave Sanshi's capitol and travel nearly a week to get to Siros."

"A whole week?" Meili asked skeptically.

Subaru shrugged. "Wagons move slowly. Especially ones loaded with food, traveling through the mountains. I've been told on good authority that the full trip up to the front is almost a week."

"How many guards will there be?" Elsa asked.

"The wagons will be guarded but I doubt it's anything that we'll have much trouble with."

"So we're going to kill the people driving the supply wagons?" Meili asked.

Subaru nodded. "Right. But only the wagons going to the front. If it's going the other way, we're going to let it pass."

"Um. Why?" Meili asked.

"Because we don't want Sanshi to know what's happening," Subaru explained. "The full trip to the front and back takes close to two weeks. That's nearly half a month before Sanshi misses its first wagon. Once that first wagon goes missing, Sanshi will realize that something is wrong and they'll try to investigate and get in our way. As long as the wagons that it expects to see come back *do* come back on time, Sanshi will stay oblivious to the problem."

Meili puzzled her way through that for a moment. Then her face brightened. "Oh, I get it!" Meili said. "If the wagons that Sanshi has already sent out don't come back on schedule then Sanshi will get suspicious. If the first wagon that doesn't come back is the one that we stopped from reaching the front in the first place then that army will have weeks to starve before Sanshi gets wise. That's really clever!"

Subaru hesitated. *For a minute there, she sounded just like that little girl who used to climb on my back in Arlem...* "Thanks," Subaru said.

"Sounds easy enough," Elsa shrugged.

Subaru nodded. "We're also going to kill any messengers we see heading to Sanshi along the road. We need to make sure that the army doesn't alert Sanshi that it's starving. This could be tricky. Those messengers will likely split up and try several different routes. I'm not sure that we can watch them all."

"My fliers can help keep watch," Meili suggested.

Subaru nodded. "That will be very helpful," He said. "We'll just do our best. Even if we don't make it the full two weeks, we should still be in good shape. Even a couple of days with no supplies will push that army into a full on crisis."

"How often do the shipments come?" Elsa asked.

"I'd estimate about twenty wagons every day," Subaru answered.

"*Twenty?*" Meili asked incredulously.

Subaru nodded. "I'm not sure if they'll come all at once or in three or four small groups through the day."

"What do we do with the food?" Meili asked.

"We'll take what we want and then destroy the rest," Subaru said carelessly.
Unfortunately, there's no way that I can bring these supplies to Siros. I might find something worth bringing home though. Combat rations are better than starvation and we will run out of food eventually.

"When I was exploring the area this morning, I found a big ravine down that path," Subaru pointed to a broad dirt road leading through the hills.

"So we push them off the cliff, then?" Meili asked.

Subaru nodded. "It's as good a way as any to make sure that the army doesn't get its supplies."

"So that's all we have to do?" Elsa asked. "And are we just staying there and killing teamsters for the whole two weeks?"

"That's the plan right now. Although I doubt we'll last that long before *something* goes wrong and Sanshi gets wise to us. We'll spend the days here. We're not really going to worry about wagons and messengers traveling at night. Traveling through the mountains after dark is just asking to stumble off a cliff. So at least we'll be able to sleep in a warm bed at night."

Subaru paused. "Did you guys have any trouble getting into the Stoneybrooke inn?" He asked.

Elsa shook her head. "They inspected us closely to make sure that we weren't demi-humans or monsters but that was about it."

Subaru made a face. *What lovely people.*

"The village is on edge," Elsa continued. "I heard them talking about being attacked by a witch the other day. Apparently, they killed the former innkeeper. Can I assume that was you?"

Subaru frowned at her.

Elsa shrugged. "The description sounded a lot like how you looked when you were fighting Mother," Elsa said carelessly.

Subaru sighed. "Yeah. They threatened to kill me and someone I care about. They're just lucky I killed only one of them instead of depopulating the whole goddamn village!" He hissed.

"Sounds fair to me," Elsa replied with a shrug.

Why is that somehow not encouraging, Subaru sighed.

"So what do we do now?" Meili asked.

Subaru shrugged. "Watch and wait," He replied.

Meili thought for a moment and then gestured to her small flock of black bird mabeasts. They flew away.

Subaru looked at Meili in confusion.

"I asked the Knickerbockers to keep watch on the road for us," Meili said, noting Subaru's puzzled expression. "They'll warn us when a caravan is coming and tell us how many there are."

"Really?" Subaru said in surprise. "You can understand what they say?"

Meili shrugged. "I can share their senses to an extent. It's not easy but if I want to, I can see through their eyes. Can't you?"

Subaru frowned. "You know what? I'm not sure. I've never tried."

The caravan appeared around mid morning.

Subaru was half dozing-against Patrasche. To his surprise, Elsa was sitting there, contentedly knitting a small doll from a few balls of yarn in her satchel. Subaru watched Meili cuddle with her Guiltylowe when the girl stiffened.

"Subaru," Meili snapped. "There are a lot of wagons coming down the road!"

"How many?" Subaru said getting to his feet.

Meili closed her eyes. "It's hard to be sure. The Knickerbockers don't have the greatest vision," She complained. "More than a dozen."

"How many guards?" Elsa asked.

Meili hesitated. "It looks like fifteen? Maybe twenty?"

Subaru nodded. "Alright. This looks like nothing we can't handle."

"What's the plan?" Elsa asked.

Subaru inspected the terrain quickly. "Send your Guiltylowe to hide up there," Subaru gestured toward the place where the road crested the hill-top nearby. "When the wagons get that far, he'll jump out and stop them. No earth dragon is going to be willing to charge at a Guiltylowe. When the caravan passes by here. We'll jump out and attack them from behind. We'll have them trapped and we should... slaughter them," Subaru murmured with a guilty expression.

Meili gestured and her Guiltylowe dashed off through the rocky hills, trying to stay under cover.

Meili gave Subaru a curious glance. "Something wrong?" She asked.

Subaru sighed. "These guys are just teamsters and soldiers. They're not... responsible for what Sanshi is doing in Siros. But they're going to die for it..."

Meili frowned, puzzling her way through that. "So?"

Subaru looked at Meili in shock then nodded in understanding. *Of course. Meili was raised by mabeasts and then by Capella and Elsa. It'd be remarkable if the law of the jungle wasn't the only rule that she respected. Still this might be a good time to try and broaden Meili's world view.*

Subaru tried to put his thoughts into words. "So... these people don't necessarily *want* to be here. They're doing their jobs to get paid so that they can keep eating. The folks who decided that Anri and her people needed to suffer are the ones that really should be killed but we're killing their minions instead."

Meili mulled that over. "So... you'd feel more comfortable killing these people if they were guilty of something?" She asked.

"Yeah, pretty much."

Meili shrugged. "Well, I'm sure that they're guilty of *something*."

Subaru gave a rueful chuckle. "That's not quite what I mean, Meili."

Meili shook her head. "You're making this too complicated, Subaru. Things are born, they live for a while, and then they die and get eaten. The nasty bit is the 'getting killed and eaten' part. Does anyone really care *why* they're being killed and eaten? If you told them that you were killing them for a good cause, would they like it any more? Would they be more upset if you told them they were dying because their own actions had finally caught up with them? The fact is that they're going to be dead and eaten and it doesn't really matter why."

Subaru rolled his eyes. *The Philosophy of Meili*.

Meili's eyes hardened. "They're coming closer, Subaru. Get ready."

Elsa had drawn her daggers, her eyes bright with anticipation. She was humming a little tune to herself as she waited.

Subaru nodded. He could hear the wheels turning on the dirt and gravel road. He also heard the voices of men passing by.

Subaru listened carefully as the sounds grew louder and then slowly began to diminish as the caravan passed by.

Subaru nodded. "Let's go."

The fight was short, brutal, and ugly. The guards *might* have been able to handle Meili's mabeasts although it would have been a bloody and hard fought battle but the guards were spread out to guard the caravan so the mabeasts attacked a small subset of them. By the time their allies had arrived to help, those soldiers were already dead.

Then again, it might not have mattered. Because the guards not only had to worry about the mabeasts but Elsa and Subaru as well.

The last few guards were no trouble at all. Elsa sliced through them like butter, humming a little ditty to herself as she did so. One tried to run away after watching his fellows get torn limb from limb but Elsa chased him down and kicked his legs out from underneath him, holding a dagger at his throat.

The teamsters cracked their whips and the earth dragons broke into a sprint.

Subaru watched their escape calmly.

It was unlikely that the heavy wagons could have escaped anyway. They were all clearly overloaded with supplies and with Subaru, Elsa, Meili, and the mabeasts behind them, the teamsters had no choice but to try to escape up hill. However, when Meili's Guiltylowe appeared at the hilltop to cut them off, their fate was sealed.

Subaru didn't get involved in the fight. He stood protectively beside Meili, ready to jump in if needed to protect the girl but he really wanted to get an idea of how well Meili could handle herself in combat.

Of course, with both Elsa and the mabeasts involved, it's unlikely that any of the soldiers even noticed Meili, much less considered attacking her.

When the dust had settled everyone was dead except for one soldier and a few wagon drivers. Subaru sensed that he had absorbed several new lives that he could to refine into *Vitae*.

Meili looked up at him expectantly.

"Good work," Subaru said awkwardly.

Meili beamed.

After the fight was over, it was time to clean up. Subaru had thrown the dead bodies into the backs of the wagons.

The surviving wagon drivers were guarded by wolgarm and they were clearly terrified. Elsa dragged the last soldier back to them and pushed him into the group.

"Subaru," Elsa murmured in his ear. "That was the full twenty wagons, wasn't it?"

Subaru shivered when Elsa whispered in his ear. For a second he felt the scar across his stomach burn with an icy cold, as if it had been ripped open again. "Looks that way," Subaru replied once he was certain that his voice wouldn't shake.

"Could I... play with the survivors then?" She asked, almost coquettishly.

"You want to *torture* them?" Subaru asked in disgust.

"Well, it's still the only way I can feel pleasure at the moment unless you brought more of the blue potion," Elsa admitted. "And what else can we do? If your plan is going to work, we can't let them get away to tell anyone and we have no place to keep them. That means that they need to die."

Subaru's face grew grim. "Elsa. I really hate that you have a point," He sighed.

She simpered.

Subaru thought for a moment, desperately trying to think of a way not to have to kill them but he came up empty. *I could order Elsa to kill them quickly at least. I could forbid her to torture them...*

Subaru had a mental image of the people of Kocytos cheering as the elven effigy burned in the fire.

You could but why bother, A voice whispered. You know these people. You know who they are. They cheer for the deaths of elves and demi-humans. Would you really lose any sleep over their deaths?

"Fine," Subaru said shortly. "Just keep them quiet, I don't want anyone around here to hear them. Don't drag it out and make sure that none of them get away."

Elsa nodded, a delighted smile on her beautiful face.

Subaru felt slightly ill looking at her. "Also, do it where Meili and I don't have to watch," He sighed.

"I don't really mind, Subaru," Meili shrugged.

Subaru closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Fine. Do it where I don't have to watch it. Put the survivors on one of the wagons and go play with them near the gorge. It'll make for easy disposal after your done."

The wolgarm quickly herded the survivors toward the gorge, followed by Elsa who had a beatific smile on her face.

Meili ordered her indignant Guiltylowe to pull the wagons one by one to the ravine and then push them off.

Watching the Guiltylowe pull the wagons was the very first time that Patrasche had ever looked pleased by the presence of the mabeasts.

Even standing by the road, Subaru heard the wagons crash into the deep ravine with a sound like thunder.

At Subaru's request, Meili had the wolgarm dig up the road a little to bury all signs of the spilled blood in the dirt.

"Now what?" Meili asked..

Subaru thought about it. "Well, that was the full twenty wagons," He mused. "I doubt that they'll be sending any more today but we should probably stand watch until sundown just in case."

Meili nodded. "Hey, any chance I could take a nap while we wait? I'm sort of tired after last night."

Subaru nodded. "Feel free. I don't think I could sleep right now so I can stand watch."

Meili nodded and slumped down on her Guiltylowe and closed her eyes.

He felt a new life absorbed and added to his collection as Elsa finished playing with one of her toys.

Subaru yawned as the sun began to set. Two more wagons had appeared but these had been headed back toward Sanshi from Siros and Subaru had let them pass.

Meili dozed on top of her Guiltylowe and Elsa lay back against it as if the mabeast was the world's strangest beanbag chair. Elsa was again knitting a small doll.

Subaru had watched the passing wagons closely but if the drivers noticed any evidence of the earlier battle, they gave no sign.

"So that's it then?" Meili asked with sleepy eyes.

Subaru nodded. "For today anyway. Someone would have to be suicidal to drive a wagon along these winding mountain roads in the dark."

"Now what?" Elsa asked.

Subaru made a face. "How tired are you guys?"

Elsa shrugged. "It's still early."

"I took a nice nap so I'm not tired either," Meili said through a big yawn.

Subaru looked at the girl with amusement and she blushed.

"OK," Subaru said slowly. "I have an appointment to keep tonight. I don't *think* she's stupid enough to try anything but she is expecting me so just in case, I wouldn't mind having some backup."

Meili stared at him. "Wow. I figured that you could fight anything after seeing you fight Mother," Meili said in surprise.

Subaru snorted. "There's always a bigger fish, Meili. You won't live very long if you assume that nobody out there can possibly hurt you."

"That's actually very good advice, Meili," Elsa agreed. She turned back to Subaru. "Where are we going?"

Senko sat on a couch in the estate, surrounded by heavily armed men including Dreyfus.

Never let anyone know who you are Lady Koi had told her. This had been one of mother's first lessons and it had been ground into Senko's soft mind since she was old enough to walk.

Senko had no trouble understanding why, of course. Her mother was a powerful member of the Black Silver Coins. Knowledge of Koi's immediate family could put both Senko and her mother in serious danger. Thus, Senko and her mother had performed an elaborate dance whenever they interacted with others, Koi had pretended to be her owner and Senko simply a slave being raised for profit.

This was a common practice for wealthy kitsune. Several famous kitsune in Kararagi were legendary for their allure. Some lived as mistresses and consorts to the powerful but a kitsune could easily earn vast amounts of money by purchasing and training a young kitsune of either gender with their own unique style of seduction and pleasure. There was even a famous school located in Kyo run by elder kitsune where they specialized in training young people as concubines and pleasure slaves for large amounts of money.

Of course, there was another reason why one kitsune might purchase another. Their race was highly endangered and young kitsune of both genders were far more likely to be kept as pleasure slaves than given the freedom to marry and have children. Slaveowners often bred their kitsune in the same way as they bred horses or cattle but this was small help. It might let the kitsune race endure but these communally raised kitsune were nothing but chattel. Raised by outsiders, carefully trained to think of themselves not as people but as objects in a collection, the kitsune culture was withering rapidly.

The few kitsune who managed to win their freedom often found that by the time of their manumission they were too old to bear their own children and thus they chose to adopt. This gave them a chance to have a child to love and raise and to pass on the rapidly vanishing elements of their proud culture. Sadly, slavery had become so intertwined with kitsune society that adoption invariably meant purchase.

Senko had been carefully raised as far away from normal kitsune as possible. Her mother had doted on her and attempted to keep from Senko the reality that society viewed her as simply a rare commodity to be bought if not outright stolen.

Senko and her mother were about as different as a parent and child could be. There had been songs written of Koi's beauty and grace when she was young. Senko was certainly attractive but where her mother was curvy, Senko was more slender. Koi appreciated the finer things in life while Senko preferred to curl up with a good book. Koi held most kitsune in mild contempt, thinking them weak for not working their way out of slavery with skill and charm if not violence and fury. Senko was fascinated by the traditional kitsune culture which predated their wide enslavement and did her best to preserve it. Koi wore loose kimonos, Senko favored an outfit with a white flowing shirt and red trousers, a garb that she had read had been worn by her ancestors who worked in the shrines.

The only thing the pair had in common was their beautiful black hair with crimsons streaks. However, because it would be suspicious for two unrelated kitsune to share such a distinctive hair color, every week Senko's hair and tail were carefully dyed blond.

Despite never intending to be parted from her daughter, Koi had carefully trained Senko for courtesan work ever since she was young. Beauty and sensuality were a kitsune's only currency in a world that viewed them as chattel and Koi had long ago learned that the difference between being a slave and a pet was how much your master valued you. Courtesan training was a family tradition dating back to Senko's grandmother who had taught Koi. It might have even gone back further than that but Koi and her mother had been separated when Koi was sold at twelve and, despite great effort, Koi had never found her again.

Koi had recognized quickly that Senko lacked her sensuality and allure. However, where another parent might have tried to mold Senko into her own duplicate, Koi had encouraged Senko to make use of her own talents, focusing on her sparkling wit and more wholesome beauty.

Now in her early teens, Senko had been presented at several upper class functions in Kararagi. Senko's wit and charm had won her many admirers and Koi was more than pleased to discover that the men who were most attracted to Senko were men who would be searching for a companion, not a pet.

Ideally, Koi had secured enough of a fortune that her daughter would never need to worry about marrying in order to protect herself. However, Koi knew that nothing was set in stone in this life, certainly not when one worked for the Black Silver Coins, and she wanted to ensure that her daughter was properly prepared if the worst should happen.

Koi was confident that if her daughter ever needed protection, she would have no trouble finding a kind and wealthy man to dote on her. An official concubine was the goal but a wife wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Especially in Kararagi where taking a kitsune as a bride was sometimes viewed as a status symbol.

Senko and her mother were very close and they could count on one hand the number of times they had fought.

While Koi was far from stupid, she had never been formally educated. Senko, on the other hand, devoured every book that she could find.

Senko had studied hard, seeking to make her mother proud. She had also studied a few things that her mother would not have approved of. Koi had never *hidden* her ties with the Black Silver Coins from Senko but Koi had made it clear that she wanted Senko kept as far away from that world as possible. Koi had been kind but resolute when she had told her gentle and kind daughter that she would not survive immersion in the harsh world of the Black Silver Coins and that her path lay elsewhere.

Senko understood this. She had no desire or interest in pursuing that life.

But she had studied the Coins all the same: Their history, their organization, their tactics, and their weaknesses. Senko knew that her mother lived a dangerous life and that someday she might need Senko to step up and protect *her*. When that time came, Senko intended to be ready.

Now that the day had finally arrived, Senko rapidly discovered that she was woefully unprepared. She sat on a couch, surrounded by guards, wishing that she knew what to do.

"Lady Senko," Dreyfus murmured.

Senko shook off her reverie and looked up at the man who was in many ways like a beloved uncle to her.

"We need to go now," He said sadly.

Senko bit her lip, trying to think of some argument. Her mother had gone to this 'peace summit' organized by Aperitif and had been out of contact for hours.

Aperitif and Koi had never been friends but they were both under considerable pressure from Zeno and alliances had been founded on less. Koi and Cynthia had agreed to go.

However, intelligence had now reached Koi's faction that the summit may have been a trap from the start.

Before leaving, Koi had instructed her personal guard that if she had not contacted them by evening, they were to presume that something had gone horribly wrong and

get Senko to a prepared safe house.

The deadline had elapsed hours ago but Senko had refused to leave.

"It's not so bad, Lady Senko," Dreyfus reassured her. "Lady Koi will know where to find us if she..." Dreyfus trailed off.

Senko took a ragged breath.

"Captain!" A man shouted, racing into the room, his eyes wild.

"What is it, Jackson?" Dreyfus asked in a clipped tone. "Is it Zeno's men?"

"Worse! Taiyang is back!"

The guards all murmured amongst themselves in terror. Some of the men had met the Taiyang personally and had no desire to do so ever again. Most of the guards had only heard about the Witch of the Frozen Wastes but anyone who could so easily traumatize the strong and capable men that they served beside was worthy of both respect and fear.

"Alright," Dreyfus snapped. Around him the guards came to attention, their respect of their captain holding them firm even in a disaster. "I need volunteers. I am going to lead a company to face this Taiyang and try to stall for time while Lady Senko escapes. Who will fight with me?"

Dreyfus's men were strong and motivated. Normally they'd be the first to sign up for a fight and the tougher the better but now no hands went up. This was a suicide mission and everybody knew it.

"That won't work, Dreyfus," Senko pointed out.

"Lady Senko," Dreyfus knelt down. "I promised your mother I would get you out of here safely and I'm going to do it if it kills me!" He said fervently.

A few of the men murmured at this revelation. Several had suspected but Senko's relation to Koi had finally been confirmed.

Senko derived a different kind of certainty from Dreyfus's statement: Dreyfus had let the secret slip because he had no real expectation that his plan would work. He thought that there were long odds of anyone in this room living to talk about it.

So be it. I can use this.

Senko rose to her feet. "Dreyfus. In my mother's absence, I am in command."

This was highly debatable, bordering on nonsensical but every man in the room took note of her poise and the certainty of her tone.

Senko turned to address the guards. "Some of you have met the monster Taiyang," She continued in a measured tone. "The rest of you have only heard of him but you all know the name. I ask you, any man in this room who believes in his heart of hearts that we can prevail against Taiyang through force, please raise your hand now."

Senko waited. Not a hand went up. Dreyfus's hand twitched and then stayed down.

Senko nodded. "If escape is unlikely and violence will not serve us in this case, we must seek a third alternative."

"What are you suggesting, Lady Senko?" Dreyfus asked.

Senko took a deep breath. "Please bring Lord Taiyang to mother's sitting room. Tell him that I will attend him there."

"Lady Senko!" Dreyfus protested.

"You have your instructions, Dreyfus," Senko said calmly. "This might be our only chance to protect ourselves from Zeno's retaliation and to rescue mother. I mean to take it."

Dreyfus bit his lip and his entire body spasmed as if he was struggling not to grab Senko and run away. "As you command, my lady," He said, finally in a tight voice. He gestured to the guards.

The guards marched out of the room.

Senko took a deep breath. *I'm not sure if this is my last hope or if I'm just trading an uncertain future for a quick death.*

Mother told me about Taiyang. She claimed that he would either be her greatest ally or her doom. However, Mother also claimed that he seems to have a sense of obligation toward his servants or at least a sense of possessiveness that makes him angry when someone else threatens to break his toys.

I'm about to bet my life that Mother read him truly...

Elsa and Meili sat on her Guiltylowe, surrounded by mabeasts in a small forest just outside Koi's estate in case Subaru needed backup.

"I hope he's OK," Meili mused.

Elsa shrugged, knitting her doll. "I doubt he'd need help honestly. And if the Master tried to fight his way out, I'm sure we'd be seeing the destruction and know where to go and help."

"Yeah..." Meili said. "Big Sis, what do you think Subaru *is*?"

Elsa paused her knitting for a moment. "I think... he's like Mother," She said finally.

"He seems a lot nicer than Mother," Meili said.

"That's not exactly a high bar to clear, Meili," Elsa stared off into the dark with a thoughtful expression. "I think that he *is* like Mother. No matter how nice he acts, I think that he's one of... *them*," Elsa said awkwardly.

"Them?"

"Mother, Lye, Roy, and... the man in the white suit," Elsa explained.

Meili shuddered. The fight between Mother and the man in the white suit all those years ago was legendary in the Assassin's Guild. Neither Meili nor Elsa had been there but they'd heard the stories. Few assassins had been in attendance to see it and even fewer had survived. The assassin base had been completely ruined and it had taken years to rebuild. Despite all the destruction that the pair had caused around them, Mother and the man didn't even seem to be doing any real damage to one another. They'd just screamed and cursed until the man in the white suit had finally gotten bored or frustrated or some combination of the two and left.

Rumor had it that Lye and Roy had kicked back and watched the show over a bottle of fine wine.

Rumor also had it that the pair had ultimately started to fight one another over the last glass in the bottle. Lye had beaten Roy senseless and finished off the bottle. Roy had stalked away biting off curses and he'd sought out some assassins to eat in the confusion.

Meili looked at Elsa with a terrified expression. "This isn't good, Big Sis. This means that Subaru is really powerful. And *really*, really dangerous," Meili said, thinking about how Subaru had shrouded himself in darkness when he fought Mother.

"True. But so far he seems to only kill people if he has a reason too," Elsa said, returning to her knitting.

"Big Sis!" Meili hissed. "Subaru already said that he hates you because you tried to kill him! He has reason to kill *you*! And he already told you that he might do it!"

"I know, Meili," Elsa said calmly. "I never expected to live to a ripe old age in this line of work. Master Subaru thinks that I'm useful. As long as he continues to think that, he'll hold himself back. And when my number is finally up, a quick, clean death is one of the best ways for me to go out. It's certainly better than Mother would have ever offered me. Although, I do hope that I get the chance to go down fighting," She added wistfully.

Meili just shook her head. *Sometimes Big Sis's view of the world drives me absolutely wild.*

"Lord Taiyang," Senko said in her most dulcet tones as she knelt on the floor, pouring tea. "It is an honor beyond imagining that I have the pleasure of hosting you tonight."

Senko briefly considered adopting her mother's more sensual mannerisms then quickly dismissed the idea. *I'm not good at being seductive. Besides, I think I can rest assured that if Lord Taiyang decides that he wants my body, he won't wait for my permission...*

Of course, that's just assuming that Taiyang really is a man and not simply some sort of demon in human form...

Senko took slow, measured breaths. Taiyang's mere presence was terrifying.

This isn't normal fear. Taiyang must be influencing everyone around him magically. Not that knowing how he's doing it makes it any easier to resist.

I'd also be foolish to conclude that his power is all smoke and mirrors...

I must remain poised and confident. My mother's life is at stake. I need to reassure Taiyang that mother is worth rescuing and that our organization is useful enough to him to merit his protection.

"It is a true honor to meet you," Senko said sipping her tea. "I also am pleased to inform you that the goods you requested be sent north have already arrived. I'm told that the people of Siros were most grateful."

"Lady Senko, where is your mother?" Taiyang asked flatly in an inhuman voice.

Senko's eyes widened slightly. *Well, Mother said that he had guessed our relationship. It doesn't matter now.*

Senko chose her words carefully. "I'm terribly sorry, my lord but I fear that my mother may have been kidnapped..."

"Kidnapped?" Taiyang growled.

He sounds angry. I'm not sure if that's good or bad...

"I'm afraid so," She said sadly. "We have gathered intelligence that Zeno may have captured my mother."

"Who is Zeno?"

Senko hesitated a moment, "My lord, how much do you know about the Black Silver Coins?"

"Very little. They have never risen to my attention."

Senko swallowed hard. *If any other man had said this it would have sounded like a confession of ignorance. When Taiyang said it, it came across as a threat not to waste his time.* "The Black Silver Coins date back almost to the time of the Great Cataclysm. They formed in all kingdoms that discriminated against demi-humans to allow the demi-human communities to earn money and protect themselves by thwarting the laws that didn't try to protect them anyway. For the most part, the Coins in different kingdoms work separately. Each kingdom is headed by a Boss but it's very rare for anyone to successfully become the Boss of Bosses, the King of Shadows."

"After the demi-human war, Vito Maiale succeeded in gathering the demi-human soldiers from the war and folded them into the Coins. With their help he took over the Coins and ruled them ever since. But sometime last year, Vito Maiale died."

"Natural causes?" Taiyang asked.

Senko hesitated. *He sound sarcastic. Can a witch have a sense of humor?* "No. The Coins in Kararagi had become powerful enough to throw their weight around. They were becoming an impediment to a number of business interests. That's when Chaco 'le Guapo' Menendez was elected to be Secretary-General of the Kararagi City States. He was young and idealistic and he ran on a platform of reform and cleaning up corruption. These candidates appear every few decades and they usually end up floating face down in the river if they attract too much support."

"But not Chaco?"

Senko shook her head. "Chaco had a powerful ally at his side. Halibel, the Gentleman Suitor."

"The what?"

Senko hesitated. "Halibel has a reputation of being a great... 'admirer' of women."

Taiyang made a strange sound. Senko wondered if he had just sighed.

"What makes him so special?"

"Halibel is a powerful warrior and assassin. He's one of the only men on the continent said to be capable of dueling the Blue Lightning, the Sword Saint, or the Mad Prince of Gusteko on equal footing. Rumor says that when Chaco was a boy, he rescued Halibel from an ambush where a job went wrong and healed him when he would have died. As a result, Halibel swore an oath of eternal friendship to Chaco and has served as his bodyguard since he entered politics."

"What does this have to do with the Coins?"

"Almost a year ago, after Chaco was elected, Maiale publicly announced that he would have him killed. Chaco decided to send a message so he dispatched Halibel to cull the Coins during their yearly meeting. Halibel slaughtered Maiale and almost all of his sons as well as the Boss of every kingdom and a large number of underbosses. The Coins were devastated. The only underbosses not in attendance were the ones in disfavor for one reason or another. The Coins consider woman in leadership positions to be unacceptable. So my mother wasn't invited and neither was Lady Cynthia and they survived. Others weren't invited because they were political enemies of Maiale."

"So who's running the Coins now?"

"That's still being discussed. There's a quiet gang war going on. There were two major candidates, Meyer Scrofa who was very unpopular with the Bosses but he's the strongest underboss left and Sextus Maiale, Vito's youngest son. Mother and Lady Cynthia were backing Maiale but a few months ago, Scrofa managed to lure him and most of his supporters into a trap and kill him. Now Scrofa has sent Zeno up here to

bring the Coins in line as the new Boss of Gusteko. Mother went to a summit today to discuss how to handle Zeno with Aperitif, Cynthia, and Koga but we now think that it was a trap and Zeno has taken her prisoner."

Senko's eyes filled with tears but she forced them back.

"So Zeno is the one who has your mother?"

Senko nodded. "Zeno has been clear in his desire to take over and absorb Mother's division. He considers her... unsuitable as a division leader and plans to... remove her. I will, of course, attempt to follow your instructions in my mother's stead for as long as I am able but I fear that if something were to happen to Mother, our entire branch of the Coins might fall to internecine fighting or be absorbed by Zeno's forces."

Taiyang was silent for a long time. "So, someone was foolish enough to abduct one of my servants," Taiyang mused, sipping his tea. "Tell me, was this 'Zeno' aware of my... arrangement with Lady Koi?"

"I have no way to know for certain, my lord," Senko replied. "I suspect so. I believe that my mother would have certainly told him that, by interfering in her fulfillment of your instructions, Zeno risked incurring your ire."

"Hm. I suppose it does not matter," Taiyang replied. "Ignorance or arrogance might explain his actions but nothing will ever excuse them."

Senko held her breath.

"Do you know where I can find this Zeno?" Taiyang asked.

Senko quickly gave him directions. "The summit was to be held at Lord Aperitif's manor is to the west, just over the border into Siros."

Taiyang thought for a moment and then stood up.

"I must warn you," Senko added diffidently. "Zeno has come here to take control of the Gusteko Coins. He will doubtlessly have a large number of guards. I'm sure that they're nothing before a man of your power but I thought it best to warn you."

"You have done well," Taiyang replied as he turned to leave the room. "When your mother returns, inform her that you have pleased me."

Senko fought to keep the elation from showing on her face. She gave a low bow.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Zeno asked with a leer. He was a towering man, built of nothing but hard muscle. He wore a thin vest that exposed his arms and chest and his head was shaved. Most of his body was covered with tattoos.

There are rumors that Zeno used to be an apprentice Acolyte Knight of Gusteko until he deserted the order. The reason why he deserted changes from telling to telling. Some claim that he decided his talents could be more profitably used in his own service rather than the Kingdom's and some claim that he lost his temper with one of his instructors and murdered him. Either way, he's a fearsome warrior that everyone is well advised to step around carefully. And now he's Scrofa's hound.

The underbosses sat at a small round table in Aperitif's manor. Koi and Cynthia were surrounded with their backs to the wall, both literally and figuratively.

"Lord Zeno," Cynthia said dubiously, taking a pull on her delicate opium pipe. "This disruption in our smuggling operations is cutting deeply into my profits." Cynthia was a voluptuous, blond woman who ran the entertainment division of the Black Silver Coins. She ran the gambling dens, fighting rings, smoking dens, and a variety of legitimate businesses for the Coins.

Koi saw Cynthia glancing at her out of the corner of her eye.

Cynthia and I have long been allies. It would be a stretch to call us 'friends' but we worked well together. Now Zeno has her wondering if she needs to cut me loose to save her own skin.

I suppose I can't blame her. I'd do the same thing in her shoes.

"Not to worry, Lady Cynthia," Zeno said in a deep, gravelly voice that came up out of his boots. "I'm sure that Koi will behave herself from now on, won't she?"

Koi pretended not to notice the disrespectful mode of address.

"Wait," Aperitif said petulantly. He was a thin effeminate elf who wore a staggering amount of makeup. He was wearing a stylish silk outfit and spoke in a lisp. "Are we really considering keeping her around?"

Curse you, Aperitif! Koi thought, glaring daggers at him. *Aperitif and I go back a long way and our hatred has been mutual since long before we joined the Black Silver Coins. We used to snipe at each other while we were at a high end brothel. I was a slave so he looked down on me. I have no idea how Aperitif was entrusted with any position of responsibility, much less overseeing the prostitution and slavery division of the Black Silver Coins but tonight I should try to keep him happy if I want to get out of here with my skin intact.*

"We should at least kill someone," Koga murmured in a vague voice. He was a skeletal young man in his teens with pallid skin and deeply sunken eyes. His hair was matted and he smelled like he hadn't bathed in months. He wore a tattered hooded overcoat and absently toyed with a small dagger.

Oh, this is bad. I didn't realize that Zeno had found a way to reach an accommodation with Koga. Koga is the head of the Black Hand. In theory it's a division of the Black Silver Coins specializing in assassination but it's a deranged cult in practice and it worships the Witches of Sin. They believe that every murder of a sinner is an act of worship to Lady Typhon. Since everyone is a sinner, basically the Hand just kills whomever they want. Koga only got the top job last year by knifing his predecessor and that man only lasted two years himself.

Periodically we talk about trying to force them out of the Black Silver Coins. They never turn a profit and they're mostly a liability to the rest of us, although they do take assassination contracts that a lunatic would turn down. But the reality is that if we opposed them, they would likely turn on us violently. That's action that none of us need.

"Hm," Zeno smirked at Koi. "Well that's two votes for execution..."

Koi fought not to swallow hard.

"Lord Zeno," Cynthia said, "I dislike it for old friends to disagree but I am firmly against anything that disrupts the supply chain of my materials. My division needs all the ingredients that we can get as we can barely keep up with demand as it is. If Lady Koi were to be... removed from her current position, the upheaval would be significant. Her lieutenants would likely flee in fear for their lives. How long would it take for her replacement to reestablish our trade connections? Smuggling is an endeavor founded on trust between partners. No one will engage in illegal business with a person they just met. Any devastation to her organization will directly impact my own."

Well, that's probably the biggest objection to my execution that I could expect Cynthia to make...

"Please," Aperitif rolled his eyes, "If a kitsune can do the job then so can a monkey!"

I'm not rising to that bait. Aperitif is a clumsy child when he's trying to provoke people. With any luck, he'll start to annoy his own allies.

"Well then, Koi, what do you say?" Zeno sneered.

Koi took a deep breath and considered her options. There were damn few.

"We're both underbosses of the Black Silver Coins. We have always existed in mutual cooperation, Lord Zeno," Koi said politely. "I fail to understand why we are disrupting this equitable arrangement now."

Zeno snorted. "You've long since forgotten your place and it's finally caught up with you. You belong on your knees in some backroom, servicing customers for a silver piece, just like Aperitif."

Koi struggled to control her expression. She saw Aperitif glare daggers at Zeno from behind his back.

Oh ho! Aperitif isn't Zeno's ally, he's Zeno's bitch, Koi thought smugly. He has no vote in this whatsoever. Aperitif is just here so that Zeno can remind him to stay in line! That's actually good news. Aperitif would never have been persuaded to let me live. Zeno and I have been at odds in the past but it was never personal. If I can convince him that I'll be loyal and obedient then maybe...

"We've all come out of tragic backgrounds," Koi shrugged. "However, today we're all here as allies for mutual protection and profit. I've always found cooperation to be preferable to competition. Forgive me for putting it so bluntly, Lord Zeno but what do you want in exchange for resuming our previous good relations?"

Zeno smirked at her. "Prostrate before me. Swear your undying allegiance to me as your master. Then we can talk about what you can do with that pretty little mouth of yours."

Koi's eyes narrowed. I might have gone for that... It's not like I haven't done worse to stay alive in the past but I recognize that glint in Zeno's eyes. This isn't a real offer. He just want to see how low he can make me sink before he kills me.

What to do? If I play along I might buy myself an hour or two. Maybe I could expect a rescue?

No. There's no point. I might as well go out with dignity. Dreyfus has undoubtedly gotten Senko to safety by now. If Zeno had my daughter he would have brought her out already to try and break my spirit.

Senko will live. That's enough.

This is my last move. What to play?

Maybe I could call Koga's allegiance into question?

"Unfortunately, I am unable to so swear, Lord Zeno," Koi said apologetically. "I'm afraid that I have recently sworn my eternal loyalty to a new master."

Zeno blinked in genuine surprise. "What?!"

Everyone in the room expressed shocked.

An underboss of the Black Silver Coins doesn't swear loyalty to anyone except the Boss or the King of Shadows. It's virtually unthinkable. I have their undivided attention. Now I make my play.

"Only last night, I was approached by a Witch of Sin, the great Lord Taiyang," Koi explained.

Out of the corner of her eye, Koi saw Koga's head snap up as if it was jerked on a string. He stared at her with his eyes wide open.

This is it. In a few minutes, Koga will either be begging me for more information about Taiyang or he'll be cutting me to ribbons as a blasphemer. It would be a quick death at least.

"What are you talking about?" Zeno said, too shocked to immediately dismiss her words as lies.

"Lord Taiyang, the Witch of the Frozen Wastes, has been sleeping in the great Elixir Forest for centuries. He recently awoke from his long slumber. Last night he requisitioned my aid to ship supplies and to gather intelligence on his great enemy. I could hardly refuse."

"You entered into an alliance with an outsider without the permission of all of us?!" Aperitif squawked.

Koi shrugged. "What would you have suggested? That I defy a Witch of Sin?"

Koi's ear twitched. From outside Zeno's manor, Koi's sharp hearing picked up shouts and the faint sounds of men in armor running.

There's some sort of disturbance going on outside. And it sounds like Zeno's forces are having trouble... Could it be Dreyfus?!

"Do you really expect us to believe this bull?" Zeno said with a broad smile.

Zeno thinks I'm bluffing. No surprise there. The problem is that I can't read how this information is affecting Koga yet!

"It's true," Cynthia murmured.

Zeno blinked. "What?!"

Cynthia looked at Koi with an unclear expression. "My own agents in her organization reported that just last night, Lady Koi issued a variety of strange orders. This was immediately after a 'monster' came to visit her in her manor. It must have been the witch."

Cynthia has spies in my organization?! I think that I might be impressed. But her cold tone worries me. I might have gained Koga's vote to let me live but I might also have lost Cynthia's! This is quite the gamble!

Zeno scowled at Cynthia and Koi.

This is it. Zeno has lost all patience. Unless Koga jumps in this is over!

Zeno stood up from his seat and marched over to Koi and Cynthia. "I've had enough from both of you. Cynthia, you have a straight choice: serve me or die. Koi, you don't get the first option!" Zeno thundered.

Zeno's voice was loud but it was drowned out by shouts of alarm and screams of pain from the hall outside the meeting room.

Zeno paused and turned to face the door.

"What's happening out there?" Aperitif asked Zeno in a near panic.

The big man ignored Aperitif. They all looked at the door. They could see the flickering light peeking under the door from torches that lined the hallway.

A moment later, the light began to fade. Instead of light being seen under the door, it was... darkness.

The darkness entered the room like smoke and crept up the other side of the door like great crawling fingers.

The room dimmed. The torches in the meeting room kept burning but the light they shed seemed to falter and dim as shadows filled the room.

Koi's jaw dropped. *It's Taiyang! How the hell did he find me? Am I saved? Or will I soon wish that I'd persuaded Zeno to kill me sooner?!*

The door opened slowly and behind it stood a man like a black cutout, a silhouette darker than the darkness. A pair of figures stood in the darkness behind him, one was a beautiful woman, the other looked like a little girl. Great red eyes gleamed in the shadows around them.

Koi heard the growl of a Guiltylowe from the hall.

Almost everyone in the room gasped and trembled.

I remember this. Taiyang wraps himself in a shadow of fear! The underbosses are terrified. Judging by the smell, I think Aperitif might even have pissed himself! Everyone here is scared speechless!

"Who are you?" Zeno growled, his eyes narrow.

Well. Almost everyone. As much as I despise Zeno, I have to admit that he's absolutely fearless.

I wish that he'd just throw himself at Taiyang but Zeno is no fool. He's not going to pick a fight until he's felt out the situation.

Taiyang walked slowly into the room. He ignored Zeno. "We had an appointment tonight, Lady Koi, did we not?" He whispered.

Koi swallowed hard. "A thousand apologies, exalted one," Koi said, standing up so that she could give him her lowest, most reverential bow. "I assure you that this mistake was not due to sloth but rather to excessive diligence."

"Oh?" Taiyang mused.

Koi nodded. "I realized that your exalted self could be better served by all of the Black Silver Coins working together. I feared that my own forces would be inadequate to carry out your grand designs. As a result, we have gathered here tonight to discuss how we might best service your needs. I fear that in our diligence to serve you, time got away from us..." She said apologetically.

Koi shot a hard look at Zeno who clenched his jaw when he looked back.

Zeno understands. I just offered him a way to escape Taiyang's fury and he knows it. Zeno isn't sure that he can fight Taiyang and he's too smart to pick a fight against a completely unknown opponent.

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like Zeno is ready to accept my offer either...

"Your words are nothing but lies," Taiyang whispered and Koi's heart stopped. "And yet you speak sense. Therefore, I will ignore your falsehoods given that you have gathered for me more powerful agents to work my will."

Koi let out the breath that she had been holding and she bonelessly slumped back into her chair. "Thank you, Master. You are merciful, Master. Thank you."

Taiyang slowly sat down in Zeno's chair.

Zeno's eyes blazed and he sprang forward with raging fury on his face.

"Zeno! Don't!" Koi screamed.

Zeno was a mountain of a man. He was known to be able to punch clear through a brick wall. He drove his fist into the Taiyang's shadowy hood with a sound like thunder.

Taiyang didn't move nor stir.

Zeno gaped at him.

Taiyang gently slapped at Zeno's elbow and Zeno leaped back with a cry of pain. His arm was now hanging at an unnatural angle, broken at the elbow joint.

Zeno stood back holding his arm and staring at Taiyang in sheer terror.

"Normally," Taiyang said in a whisper, "I would kill a man for daring to lay hands upon my august person... but I'm sure that this was simply a game intended to amuse me."

By chance or intent, Taiyang took Zeno's seat at his own conference table. I can't imagine anything that would have provoked Zeno more. It made him angry enough to abandon his natural caution. Did Taiyang do this on purpose knowing that Zeno would attack without thinking? Was it part of a plan to establish Taiyang's dominance before the conversation even started?

The underbosses all turned to stare at Koi, hoping that she had some answers.

Koi slowly stood up and placed her hands on her thighs, giving her lowest and most reverential bow. "Lord Taiyang, we are humbly grateful for you gracing us with your presence. There is no higher honor for the Black Silver Coins than to host an almighty Witch of Sin."

Koi did not straighten up but she took a quick glance at the others. Zeno's face was a riot of rage and fear. It had likely been decades since anyone had hurt Zeno at all, much less effortlessly snapped his limb. Zeno clearly didn't know how to react. Cynthia and Aperitif both stared open mouthed at Taiyang. Koga looked at Taiyang with complete hatred.

Oh shit. Koga looks like he might try to attack Taiyang next. He's actually stupid enough to not even consider if he can win. If that happens, we might all die. Taiyang's patience has got to be exhausted by now and if Zeno can't handle Taiyang then there's no way that Koga can.

"Rise, Lady Koi," Taiyang breathed a few moments later. "As always your manners are exquisite. I value that in those who serve me."

Cynthia and Aperitif stared at Koi in astonishment as she gracefully straightened her posture. "Thank you, Lord Taiyang. I know I speak for all of my associates when I say, we are your most humble servants and we trust to your gratitude when we have done your will."

"Well said," Taiyang said. Koi thought that he was smirking.

Well, any way that I can charm Taiyang is a victory...

"Also," Taiyang continued. "I was pleased to make your daughter's acquaintance."

Koi's heart stopped. *No! What has he done?! Did he take her prisoner to ensure my good behavior?! Did he-*

"Your daughter is a remarkable girl," Taiyang murmured. "She looked death full in the face and did not flinch. It was very impressive. I expect great things from her in the future."

It took Koi a moment to process the statement but as soon as she did, she could have wept in joy.

Taiyang sees the value in my daughter! She's safe! Even if I fail Taiyang, he won't punish me by attacking Senko!

Koi was so ecstatic about this turn of events that for a moment she could only stand there and grin foolishly.

Koi's eyes widened as she saw Koga jump to his feet, dagger in hand and throw himself at Taiyang's back.

Before Koi could yell for Koga to stop or warn Taiyang, there was a blur and Koga went flying against the wall. Koga slammed into the wall and slid to the ground. He was out cold.

A voluptuous woman in a formfitting outfit was suddenly standing between Taiyang and Koga's unconscious body with a broad smile.

"He's still alive, Master," The woman said cheerfully. "I wasn't sure if you needed him for anything so I made sure not to kill him."

Koi's jaw dropped. I know that woman! She's the Bowel Hunter! Some of my associates have hired her before. She's supposed to be one of the premier assassins on the continent but she's a psychotic basket-case! Send her on a mission and she's likely to go berserk and kill forty people and, if you're lucky, maybe one of them will be your target.

She's a raging wild fire that no one can control.

Taiyang managed to tame her?! She looks proud to be standing there beside Taiyang.

It sounds crazy but I know that expression on her face. She just did something for her master and this ruthless killer is looking at him as if she's hoping for candy and a pat on the head!

Taiyang hadn't even turned his head at Koga's attack. "Well done," He replied. "Your loyalty will be rewarded."

Her face brightened. "Does that mean that I get to play with him?!" She asked eagerly.

"Just keep him quiet while you do," Taiyang said in a voice like a winter wind.

The beautiful woman cooed and knelt over Koga's prone body with her daggers drawn.

Taiyang looked at the bosses seemingly about as disturbed by Koga's attempt on his life as he would be by a buzzing fly. "Please," Taiyang waved a hand. "Do not stand on ceremony. Be seated. I wish to get to know each of you better."

Zeno slowly walked over to Cynthia and sat down beside her with a scowl on his face. He gently put his broken arm on the table, holding it in place.

"Lady Koi, since you are the only one in attendance tonight who knows everyone, please be so kind as to perform introductions," Taiyang instructed.

Koi swallowed hard. "Of course, Lord Taiyang. In attendance tonight we have Master Zeno, an emissary of the southern underbosses, Lady Cynthia who supervises the entertainment division of the coins, and Aperitif who manages prostitution and slavery."

Taiyang looked at Aperitif coldly for a moment. Aperitif swallowed hard.

"Lovely to meet all of you," Taiyang said finally, "I'm sure that you all have things to do tonight, attending to my desires not least of them. Lady Koi, would you be so kind as to instruct your comrades in my design?"

Me? Why doesn't he just do it? What game is he playing?

Oh no! He's not going to let me fade into the background! He's keeping me as his point of contact. As long as I stand between the other underbosses and Taiyang then they'll feel less willing to fight back. They have me as a buffer zone. As long as Taiyang doesn't disrupt operations too much, they'll accept propitiating him as just the cost of doing business!

There's nothing I can do about this right now except to play along...

Koi cleared her throat. "Of course, exalted one. Lord Taiyang recently awoke from his long slumber because of the actions of an enemy."

Everyone looked at Koi with rapt attention, anxious to learn any of Taiyang's weak spots.

"This enemy, Subaru Natsuki," Koi continued, noting the shocked looks on everyone's faces, "Was able to elude our master due to chance and poor timing."

Taiyang audibly drummed his fingers on the table.

Oh no.

Koi took a deep breath. "I have also discovered that, without my knowledge, some of my smugglers broke our sacred laws and attempted to go into business for themselves by smuggling Subaru Natsuki across the border and away from Lord Taiyang."

Koi was pained but unsurprised to find that all the other underbosses were glaring at her.

Koi swallowed hard. Taiyang wants to isolate me. To ensure that no one is interested in helping me conspire against him. If this goes much further, I may be permanently tethered to Taiyang. If anything were to happen to him, I might be next! The Black Silver Coins could accuse me of either treachery or incompetence and the penalty for either one is death.

My only possible way out is to find Taiyang's great enemy: Subaru Natsuki. If he can protect me from Taiyang then he can easily protect me from Zeno as well...

Zeno growled. "Then we need to hunt down those idiots and teach them a lesson."

"Lord Taiyang saved you the trouble, Master Zeno," Koi said quietly. "I sent agents into the forest to discover what happened to my smugglers. They reported a vast field of torn up human body parts. They said it looked like they were ripped apart by wild beasts."

The underbosses all looked at each other nervously and then at Taiyang. They had each killed dozens at the very least over their careers and ordered the deaths of countless more. But this was something new. "Your smugglers made three mistakes," Taiyang said calmly. "They entered into my domain without my permission. They aided my foe. And rather than ask pardon, your men thought it best to attack me. They died. Slowly."

Cynthia cleared her throat. "These ignorant smugglers certainly committed a terrible offense against your lordship. I know that your wrath must be powerful when you have been wronged so clearly by those who had no just-cause to offend you. But if I might be so bold, what are your intentions toward the Black Silver Coins?"

"Please, be at peace, Lady Cynthia," Taiyang said. "I am the great lord Taiyang and my benevolence knows no bounds. I have agreed to forgive the Black Silver Coins for their trespass in exchange for their service."

"Service, Great One?" Cynthia asked in a worried tone.

Taiyang gestured toward Koi who continued with a sigh. "Lord Taiyang has crafted a brilliant plan to capture Subaru Natsuki. Subaru Natsuki had two Great Spirits in his

care that he treated like children. Apparently the kingdom recently captured them. If Lord Taiyang were to capture the spirits, then Subaru Natsuki would come to him."

"We're going to try and capture Great Spirits?" Zeno asked incredulously.

"No," Taiyang replied. "I shall capture the Great Spirits. Their power is insignificant next to one who has fully mastered the dark arts. I require the Black Silver Coins simply to find them for me. I also desire to know the location of Subaru Natsuki's other friends and companions."

Taiyang looked at the other bosses. "Are my instructions clear to each of you?"

The bosses all nodded. They looked at one another with grim faces.

They're still all glowering at me. They blame me for causing this entire mess. Maybe I should leave with Taiyang under the excuse of needing to talk to him. If I stay here it won't be long until Zeno decides to make me pay for my mens' mistakes and this time, no one will speak up for me...

"Lady Koi shall be my point of contact with all of you," Taiyang murmured. "I shall rely on her to guide you and provide me reports. I'm sure you'll all do all in your power to assist her. She shall give you instruction in my sacred name."

Zeno bit his lip as he glared at Koi with raw hatred. "Of course, my lord," He growled. "We will be your most obedient servants."

"Yes," Cynthia said, glaring at Koi coldly. "We shall see your will done."

Aperitif was trembling too hard to say anything.

Oh no. That did it. I'm now fully tied to Taiyang. If anything happens to Taiyang, the other bosses will kill me. Taiyang has simultaneously raised me to be the uncontested Boss of the Black Silver Coins of Gusteko and made it impossible for me to survive without his backing. If I displease Taiyang, all he has to do is announce that he will no longer grant me his favor and the other bosses will tear me apart. It's a brilliant strategy. I'd be impressed if anyone but me was caught in this trap.

I thought that I knew what slavery was but Taiyang's words have bound me to him more surely than any chain.

There's no other way to look at it. I belong to Taiyang now...

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

Shortly thereafter, Taiyang left the meeting and Koi was quick to accompany him.

The other underbosses are terrified of Taiyang, Koi thought to herself. They should be unwilling to cross me without his blessing but you never know what will happen when people are angry enough. Even if Taiyang responds to their treachery by tearing them to pieces, I will still be dead.

Until things settle down, I'm better off leaving with Taiyang and his... Acolytes? What relationship does he have with the Bowel Hunter and the little girl? Are they his minions? His apprentices? I doubt they're his consorts. I suppose they're both pretty enough, each in her own way but it's a strange man who expresses an interest in both grown women and grade-schoolers.

"Lady Koi," Taiyang murmured.

Koi snapped her attention back onto the presence. "Yes, Master?" She said, pausing her steps to give a graceful bow.

"I require some chemicals for a magical experiment," Taiyang said. "Specifically, sal-ammoniac. You will obtain a supply for me."

Koi had no idea what he was talking about but it didn't matter. She was certain that whatever it was, she could obtain it for him through her connections. "Of course, Master."

"In gratitude," Taiyang mused as they left Aperitif's mansion. "I will grant you access to the results of these experiments when they are complete."

Koi wasn't sure what that meant but it sounded promising.

A gift is always good. Unless Taiyang is being sarcastic and he's offering me a lethal poison or a demon in a bottle.

Then again, I could probably still sell those...

I used the 'Year' he offered me and I saw the effects immediately! They were subtle as I've managed to keep my beauty intact but I do have the one gray hair I know of.

I watched closely as I drank the elixir and the hair turned black instantly as if it had been doused in dye.

I should encourage Taiyang to create more of this elixir. We could make mountains of gold off it.

Still, that's a conversation for later.

Koi cleared her throat. "In addition, Master," She continued. "I believe that we have a lead on your foe's wayward spirits."

Taiyang stopped short and turned to stare at Koi.

Koi fought to hold her face impassive. "We should know if the information is good within a day or two, Master."

Taiyang nodded his head almost imperceptibly. "Excellent," She whispered. "You have performed well, Lady Koi. It is clear that I was right to place you as my hand in the Black Silver Coins."

Koi relaxed slightly.

Subaru returned to the House late that night and found the girls reading in the sitting room.

Emilia looked up at him with a sullen expression. "Hello, stranger."

Subaru sighed. "Hello, Emilia," Subaru said, sitting down beside her.

Subaru kissed Emilia gently. She didn't try to pull away from him but she didn't engage and encourage his kiss either.

"So... where have you been for the past two days?" Anri asked quietly.

Subaru pinched the bridge of his nose. "So. I've been pretty busy. First of all, your supplies have arrived and everyone was most appreciative."

"Really?" Anri said excitedly.

"Yeah. Secondly, remember how Elsa and Capella wanted you dead?"

"*Capella?*!" Emilia asked in shock.

"Yeah. Apparently Elsa worked for Capella," Subaru explained.

"Who's Capella?" Anri asked.

Subaru's face was grim. "She's a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult. She's a shape-shifter. Her favorite shapes are a black dragon, a bear, and an evil, little, blond bitch who needs to have her mouth washed out with soap!"

"What does Capella want with *me*?!" Anri gasped.

"No idea but her looking for you is *not* good," Subaru growled. "She's definitely not afraid of us. Capella seems to be invulnerable as far as I can tell. I smashed her into sludge and she just... reformed. I have no idea how we could kill her or even hurt her. If Capella finds us..."

Subaru shook his head. "Anyway. Elsa isn't looking for you anymore," Subaru said evasively.

"You killed Elsa?" Emilia gasped.

Subaru hesitated.

"What about Capella?" Anri asked.

"She got away," Subaru replied. "On an unrelated note, I found a way to block the supply shipments to the Sanshi army. In a few more days, they're going to get *very* hungry."

"How did you do *that*?" Anri asked.

Subaru made a face. "I... hired a few people to waylay the wagon caravans. That should reduce the pressure on Siros."

"In that case, maybe Siros can finally push them back!" Anri said excitedly.

"Probably not," Subaru replied.

Anri's face fell.

"Sorry, Anri. But the balance hasn't shifted *that* much yet. And I still need to deal with the other army at Kocytos. If they reach Siros, the game's over. I need to stop them from marching."

"How are you going to do that?" Anri asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I have a plan. I'm going to head over that way tomorrow. It'll probably be another late night."

"Do you need some help?" Anri asked.

Subaru looked at her darkly, remembering all her lies. "Thanks, Anri. But I think I got this."

The following afternoon, after slaughtering another caravan, Elsa, Meili, and Subaru met at the Red Grape, a massive tavern on the King's Highway not far from Kocytos.

The place was three stories high with a bar on each level. For this world, the restaurant was enormous and it catered to travelers going up and down the main trade road.

It was very crowded that evening. Subaru, Elsa, and Meili didn't attract too much attention under their hooded robes.

They took a table in the corner and sat down.

A waitress with stringy red hair and a low cut blouse came up to their table. "What can I get you? You're early for dinner but the food is already cooking."

Subaru shrugged. "I guess get us three of whatever is for dinner tonight."

The waitress nodded. "Mutton stew and fresh bread are on the menu today," She explained. "Be about fifteen minutes?"

Subaru nodded. "Get us three of those then."

God, I'm exhausted. I'm living on almost no sleep...

"Anything to drink?"

"I'll have a very dry Genever martini," Subaru said without thinking. "Shaken not stirred, straight up with a twist of lime and a splash of vermouth. But if you don't have Genever gin then give me a mix of straight wheat-vodka and an infusion of juniper berries or conversely, three parts corn-vodka to one part Sambuca and a mix of juniper and cranberries but only if the cranberries are fresh."

The waitress stared at Subaru in shock for a long moment. "This is a bar, Hun. We have grog, vodka and mead."

Subaru blinked and made an incredulous face. *Wait. What the fuck did I just say?! I don't even know what half of those words mean! I don't drink, I've never been a drinker. I don't even know what a martini is!*

How did I come up with that recipe? Is that something I got from Daphne?

Worry about it later.

Subaru coughed. "Just water, please."

"Give me a Boar's Head grog," Elsa murmured.

"I'll have a... Boar's Head too," Meili said, uncertain what she was ordering but confident that whatever Big Sis wanted was the best there was.

The waitress looked indulgent. "You can't have any grog," The waitress scolded gently. "You're too young."

Meili looked offended.

The waitress gave Meili a warm smile. "I think I have some fresh milk in back."

"Milk?!" Meili protested.

"Milk," The waitress said firmly, bustling off.

"You drink Boar's Head Grog?" Subaru asked in disbelief. *I know that label. Rom drinks it. Which makes me think that whatever this drink is, it might be potent enough to kill Meili on ingestion. Not to mention strip the paint off the walls.*

Meili shook her head. "No. I've never drank it before. But if Big Sis drinks it then it must be great!"

Subaru raised an eyebrow and gave Elsa a steady look.

Elsa just shrugged.

Meili gave Elsa a look of annoyance. "You know, Big Sis, you could have helped me out there."

Elsa shrugged. "If you wanted something else then you should have insisted on it to the barmaid."

"We're trying not to attract attention here," Meili reminded her. "Me making demands just looks like a little kid throwing a tantrum unless I back it up with threats, violence, and snarling mabeasts. And that attracts a *lot* of attention. You just *asking* her to treat me to a drink because it's my birthday or something would have avoided all that."

Elsa shrugged again.

Meili sighed in resignation. "So, Subaru, what are we doing tonight?"

"We're going to head into Kocytos. Our targets are all located at parties tonight so we'll need to break in and kill them."

"Any special abilities?" Elsa asked excitedly. "Or talented fighters?"

Subaru shook his head. "I don't think so, no."

Elsa sighed in disappointment.

"How many targets?" Meili asked.

"About six hundred altogether, I'm guessing," Subaru replied.

Elsa's jaw dropped.

"Are you insane?!" Meili squeaked.

Subaru snorted. "The two of you are going to take on about a hundred unarmed soldiers. I also found you some reinforcements so you can probably handle those numbers. I'll deal with the other five hundred at the other party."

Meili and Elsa exchanged an astonished look and the pair knew that they were thinking the same thing. *He thinks that he can kill five hundred soldiers at once?! Could he really be that much stronger than Mother? Or even the man in the white suit?*

"How are you going to do that?" Meili whispered.

Subaru shrugged. "Not sure yet. I think I might just wing it," He chuckled.

Meili just stared at him in disbelief.

"Master," Elsa said slowly. "Even with whatever 'reinforcements' you've cobbled together, a hundred people is a lot to take on at once."

"Don't worry," Subaru said with a smirk. "You'll be well equipped. Trust me."

Meili and Elsa shared a worried look.

The waitress returned with three plates of mutton in what looked less like stew than heavy gravy. She returned to the bar and then came back with three glasses.

Elsa drained her shot at a gulp and Meili looked at her milk with clear disdain.

"I'll have another Boar's Head," Elsa murmured.

"Me too!" Meili piped up.

The waitress looked sternly down at Meili. "I'm not getting you alcohol! You shouldn't even be in a place like this! Now sit still and drink your milk like a big girl so that you can grow up big and strong."

Meili snarled at the waitress but the barmaid ignored her, dismissing it as just a little girl pouting, never even suspecting that this little girl's pets could easily kill everyone in the room if she was so inclined.

Subaru stared at Meili for a long moment. Finally, he made a face and shrugged. "Eh, bring the kid a shot if she really wants one. *One*," He added sternly, looking at Meili.

Meili looked thrilled.

The waitress gasped. "Excuse me?!" The waitress demanded.

"Yeah?" Subaru asked, looking at the barmaid with a bored expression.

The waitress stared at him in disbelief. "Sir. Look maybe this is none of my business but do you *really* think that it's appropriate to give your little sister alcohol?!" She demanded.

Subaru flinched. The words 'little sister' brought to mind a precious blond girl who was far away from him right now and likely very lonely and very scared.

Oh, Beatrice. I'm so sorry. Why am I doing anything right now except for fighting to rescue you and Puck?

"Sir?" The waitress said with an edge in her voice.

Subaru shook out of his reverie and looked up at the waitress. "What?" He growled.

"Do you really think it's appropriate to give a child alcohol?"

Subaru growled. His fury at the missing spirits had fully transferred to the waitress. "In small amounts, sure," Subaru replied. "Why? Don't you think so?"

The waitress opened her mouth to answer.

"Trick question," Subaru cut her off brusquely. "Because you see, I do not *care* what you think. You're a barmaid in a backwater tavern in the ass-end of nowhere, waiting tables and wearing low cut blouses to get tips from smelly travelers. Believe me, no one has *ever* come to this establishment feeling the least bit curious to hear your opinion about *anything*. Now fuck off and go do what you were told."

The waitress turned pale with fury but Subaru threw three silver coins at her which she barely caught before they struck her. This would pay for all their meals, a sizable tip, and then some so the waitress swallowed her fury and started to walk away.

Meili was practically jumping up and down in her seat, she looked so excited.

"Why did you do that?" Elsa asked curiously.

Subaru sighed. Now that he'd bit the waitress's head off for something she was entirely innocent of, he felt fairly ashamed. "Because I'm in a really bad mood and I'm

exhausted," He admitted.

"No, I mean why did you order Meili grog?"

Subaru shrugged. "Because she wanted it. Doing nice things for your coworkers helps foster a good working relationship."

"And what about me?" Elsa asked.

Subaru snorted and stood up. "I know what kind of 'treats' would make you happy, Elsa. Believe me, you'll have plenty of them before the night is over."

Elsa giggled.

The trio started to eat dinner.

A minute or two later, the barmaid delivered their drinks.

Meili eagerly took the shot glass. Elsa watched her, intrigued by what would happen next.

"Meili, you should really take that slow-" Subaru warned her.

Meili tossed the shot back with a delighted smile on her face. Then her eyes bugged out and she panted for breath. Elsa looked faintly amused as she rubbed Meili's back and the little girl struggled to catch her breath.

"This is awful!" She choked. "How do you drink this garbage?!"

Elsa laughed and Subaru found himself hiding a smile. The barmaid stood there, giving Subaru an icy glare that he completely ignored.

"Now, Meili," Subaru said. "I realize that you don't have much experience with drinking so I thought I should give you some pointers."

Meili's eyes opened wide. "OK, Subaru," She said in surprise.

Elsa looked curious while the waitress looked incredulous.

Subaru was tired and his mind was wandering. "First of all, you need to know that all liquors are not created equal. You always want a high-quality liquor that's been well-filtered and has the proper blends of flavorings mixed in. It's not worth drinking something that tastes like lantern oil," Subaru mused.

Meili made a face, looking at the last few drops of the Boar's Head Grog in her shot glass.

"Tell me, Meili, what's your favorite food?"

Meili brightened. "Ice cream!" She cried.

"Ice cream," Elsa murmured at the same time.

Subaru thought for a moment then turned to the waitress. "Do you have any cream liquors? Maybe a Vollachian spirit with a bit of cocoa seasoning?"

The waitress scowled at him. "We have *something* like that," She admitted in a growl. "But we only sell it by the bottle."

Subaru dropped a gold coin on the table. "We'll take it. Also we'll have two glasses of that liquor. On the rocks with a maraschino cherry garnish. And bring us a dish of salted nuts or whatever other salty dish you have on hand," Subaru directed.

The waitress looked annoyed at Subaru's tone but his coin was more than enough to buy the whole bottle so she took the money and walked off.

Meili experimentally took a lick of the remnants of her shot glass and then visibly cringed at the harsh flavor.

The waitress came back a minute later with a small black bottle, a glass bowl, and a bag of nuts. She poured the nuts into the bowl. She returned moments later with two small glasses filled with ice and a toothpick cheery garnish. She poured the cream liquor over the ice.

Meili eagerly picked up her glass but Subaru gently covered it with his hand and forced it back down onto the bar.

Meili looked at him in confusion.

"When drinking, remember. Sip it. Take your time," Subaru said seriously. "Your stomach is only so big. Your stomach size determines how much flavor you can enjoy in a given sitting. Once it's full, you need to either stuff yourself painfully or force yourself to regurgitate to make more room. Neither one is fun," Subaru said laconically. "Take small sips. Savor every drink. Remember, the focus should be on *pleasure* not just on feeling full."

Meili frowned, uncertain that she understood what he was talking about but she raised her glass and slowly took a sip. Her face brightened. "This is *good*!" She chirped. It tasted nothing like ice cream but it was smooth and rich flavored, nothing like the cheap grog that Elsa had drunk.

"Now eat a nut," Subaru directed.

Meili grabbed one and, remembering Subaru's instructions, ate it slowly.

"Try to eat a little of each every time," Subaru instructed. "The salty nuts will make the liquor feel sweeter and the sweet liquor makes the nuts more savory. Part of good dining is understanding how each flavor can bring out and enhance each other."

"Wow," Meili muttered, trying to do as he said. "You sure know a lot about gourmet dining, Subaru!"

"Hm? I don't know anything about gourmet dining," Subaru disagreed, sniffing his liquor's bouquet and then taking a small sip.

"No. Seriously, you talk just like Lye!" Meili assured him. She hesitated, suddenly wondering if he would take that as an insult. Lye wasn't nearly as bad as Roy but the twisted little man was still creepy. He looked like he was only slightly older than Meili but Big Sis swore that he'd been leering at her since she was Meili's age. Meili remembered countless times that she had turned around and found the twisted man looking at her like she was a delicious pastry.

Subaru blinked and Meili watched his face fill with confusion. He looked down at the fancy drink in his hand as if unsure as to how it got there.

He sighed. "Well, whatever. Let's finish eating and then we'll head into town."

The trio walked through the woods. Meili's mabeasts paced them.

"Subaru," Meili said slowly. "Even with my mabeasts, a hundred people is a lot to take on at once."

"Don't worry," Subaru said with a smirk. "Like I said, I brought along some reinforcements."

A moment later, Meili felt her Guiltylowe tense up.

Meili peered through the the underbrush and saw red eyes moving between the leaves. The red eyes came closer until a group of Guiltylowe emerged from the shadows

followed by a huge pack of wolgarm.

Meili heard Elsa gasp.

What drew all these mabeasts here?! Elsa thought in shock. I've never seen an army of mabeasts this big! There's no way that Meili can control this many. I doubt this is a fight that we can win. But at least I'll go down swinging.

The mabeasts came closer and then sat down patiently.

Meili stared at them in amazement.

"Meili," Subaru murmured. "These are *my* mabeasts. They'll do as you say."

As soon as he said this, Meili felt as if a door had been opened in her mind. She could sense the thoughts of these new mabeasts. She'd never been able to sense so many mabeasts at once before and the experience was momentarily overwhelming but where normal mabeast minds were fractious and rebellious, these mabeasts had thoughts that were subdued and submissive. Subaru had ordered them to obey her and that was that.

This elevated Meili's opinion of Subaru quite significantly. *I mean, Mother will probably still try to kill me if she thinks she can get away with it but if working for Subaru let's me have this many Guiltylowe then maybe it really is worth dying for!*

Meili slid off her Guiltylowe with a cry of delight and ran to embrace the five new cat-like monsters. She nuzzled against them, trying to hug as many of the Guiltylowe as she could.

Meili's original Guiltylowe gave a low snarl of annoyance as the new mabeasts gathered around its human.

Meili squealed in delight at the pack of massive Guiltylowe. "They're so *fluffy*!" She shouted in rapture. Guiltylowe were her absolute favorite mabeasts but she could only control one at time and *only* if the horn that connected the powerful mabeast to its pack was cut off or otherwise damaged, allowing her thoughts to interact with it.

Subaru looked at Meili with bemusement as she cooed over the ferocious monsters.

The new Guiltylowe sniffed curiously at Meili. One Guiltylowe attempted to pet Meili's head with a paw the size of a radial tire. The mabeasts gathered around Meili, slowly accepting their new pack member. The other mabeasts spread out among Meili's pack, all sniffing one another and issuing low growls to establish rank in the new pack.

"They're so fluffy! I just can't *stand* it!" Meili screamed in delight.

Subaru rolled his eyes. "I'm happy that you're happy," Subaru murmured. "Do you guys think that this pack is big enough to handle those hundred unarmed soldiers?"

Meili giggled. "My new pets will rip them apart! Especially with Big Sis helping. It won't even be a fight!" Meili now found herself at the center of a huge new family including a half-dozen Guiltylowe, her absolute favorite kind of monster. All of these new mabeasts took to Meili like a long-lost, little sister. She was in absolute heaven.

"You are full of surprises, Master Subaru," Elsa whispered.

Subaru shrugged. He whistled and Patrasche came running into the clearing. The earth dragon looked askance at the mabeasts but regular proximity had made Patrasche less nervous around the horde.

Subaru turned back to Meili who was giggling like a kid in a toy store.

"Meili," Subaru said. "Now, I know that you'd just love to spend the night playing with your new pets but we do have a timetable and we really need to be going."

Meili sighed regretfully but she left the new mabeasts alone and mounted her original Guiltylowe. Elsa slid up behind her. The lion-like beast gave the other Guiltylowe a low snarl, warning them to keep their distance from its human.

The new Guiltylowe all looked distinctly unimpressed.

"We'll ride to Kocytos," Subaru said. "It's not far from here and then we'll hide the mabeasts in the woods while we investigate our targets."

Subaru nudged Patrasche and the earth dragon flew out of the clearing, followed by Meili on the Guiltylowe and then the rest of the mabeasts.

"Hey, Elsa," Subaru said conversationally. "What do you know about poisons?"

Subaru, Elsa and Meili wondered through the busy city of Kocytos at sunset. It was late but the city was still busy although it appeared that the shops were closing up.

The three kept their hoods up to avoid being noticed. Patrasche and the mabeasts waited in the nearby forest just outside of town.

Patrasche had been extremely uncomfortable about this arrangement and all unprompted, Meili had ordered the mabeasts to protect her, hoping to earn some favor from Subaru.

Subaru looked at the passing citizens with bemusement. *Huh. I would have expected people to be more on edge than this. Their festival was attacked by a witch a few days ago. You'd think the town would be on high alert. Maybe most people don't believe it really happened?*

"Where are we going?" Meili asked.

"Well, we've already found where *your* targets will be tonight. Now I want to check out the place where mine will be," Subaru murmured.

They passed a toy store and Subaru paused. "Actually, this might be an idea," He said, walking inside.

Meili and Elsa followed in confusion.

There was a slender, gray-haired woman standing behind the counter. "Sir, if you and your wife are going to be buying something for your little girl, please be quick. We're open late today on account of the ongoing festival but I want to close up shop soon."

Subaru looked awkward. "They're not..." He trailed off with a sigh.

Elsa giggled.

Subaru walked through the store followed by Elsa. Meili paused when she caught sight of a large stuffed tiger on a shelf. Meili stopped for a moment and cooed at it before hurrying to catch up with Elsa and Subaru.

Subaru was studying a shelf full of masks. "Why don't you each pick out a mask?" He suggested.

"Why?" Elsa asked immediately.

"Because your 'mama' might come looking for you if she hears about you pulling jobs," Subaru said bluntly. "So the masks will let you be anonymous if you so choose."

Elsa and Meili thought it over and then shrugged. They both pulled a mask off the shelf. Elsa's was a plain black mask with a delicately pointed chin and golden inlays. Meili had chosen the same mask as her Big Sis.

They went to the counter and Subaru payed for them. Then they left the store and continued walking through town.

"What are we looking for now?" Elsa murmured.

"Something called 'the Great Hall,'" Subaru replied, wandering through the streets.

Elsa tugged on his sleeve. "It's over there," She pointed.

Subaru made a face. "Thanks."

They started walking in that direction.

"What is a 'Great Hall?'" Meili asked.

"It's a place in Gusteko towns for large functions," Elsa explained. "The weather up here doesn't always allow people to gather outside so most major cities have a 'Great Hall' to rent where you can squeeze in a few hundred people to eat and drink."

Subaru saw the enormous building soon after. It looked like a giant warehouse. A harried man stood in front of the place, yelling at underlings who were rolling huge barrels of beer into the building.

Subaru's eyes narrowed. "Wait here for a minute," He whispered to Meili and Elsa.

He hurried down the street and to the Great Hall, standing in front of the harried men. He was middle-aged, balding, and nearly skeletal. It looked like every order he shouted at his employees took just about everything he had left.

"Move it, Clancy! We only have another two hours, this is no time for a break! Chris, keep that barrel rolling up the middle of the ramp! If it falls and breaks out, you'll be repaying me for that spilled beer for the next twelve months!" The man noticed Subaru standing beside him. "What the hell do you want?" He asked in a slightly more composed tone.

"A couple of coppers?" Subaru asked.

The man's face twisted in disgust. "You can't beg here! Get lost before I call the watch on you!"

"I don't want to beg! I want to work! You look like you're short-handed tonight, right? I'll work hard for you. You give me a couple of coppers. We're both happy."

The man thought about that for a long moment. "Can you wait tables and serve drinks?" He asked.

"I've done it before," Subaru lied.

The man nodded slowly. "Alright. We have a freaking *huge* party starting in less than two hours. Work for me until midnight and I'll give you five coppers," He offered. "Payable at the end!" He added.

"Awesome!" Subaru shouted with feigned excitement. *Five coppers for a little more than five hours of work? Well, that's slightly better than what Felt was making in the slums but not much...*

Subaru continued. "Just let me drop off my groceries at home and I'll be right back!"

The man nodded. "Alright but move it! We have a lot to do and no time to do it!"

Subaru scurried back to Elsa and Meili.

"Nice way to gain entry," Elsa commented as Subaru rushed over. "I could never do that."

"Why not?" Subaru asked, trying to catch his breath from running.

Elsa gave him a wry smile. "I'm sorry but in case you haven't noticed, I'm hot. Like *smoking* hot? A beautiful woman doesn't blend into the background very well and I almost invariably attract the kinds of attention from unpleasant individuals that requires me to defend my person."

Subaru made a face. "Well, I won't blame you for killing those kind of people. But just for the record, the way that you dress doesn't help."

Elsa sighed and theatrically rolled her eyes skyward. "Typical man. Always asking 'what was she wearing' when she was attacked."

Meili giggled.

Subaru gave Elsa a steady look. "If I could get this conversation back on track," He grumbled.

"So what's the plan?" Meili asked.

Subaru sighed. "I'll take care of everything here. The sergeants for this army are going to be partying here tonight. I can just about promise you that none of them will leave here alive. You two go deal with the captains at the estate we saw earlier."

Meili squinted up at him. "OK. But I have a question. Wouldn't it be easier to just kill the generals?" She suggested. "There's probably a lot fewer of them."

Subaru shook his head. "It's easy to replace a general, especially if he doesn't have to be very good at his job. I've learned from... certain sources that a lot of senior officers in Gusteko tend to be political appointees and not career military. Malcolm Griest seems to appoint them based on their loyalty to him so he's relying on their junior officers to know the business of war. Inexperienced men can command the overall political strategy but they can't command tactics. An army can move without a general but it's not going anywhere without sergeants and captains. Without captains in the field to interpret orders and sergeants to ensure that the men actually carry out those orders, even the best plan will crumble into dust."

Meili raised her eyebrow. She looked impressed.

Subaru sighed. "Alright, you guys take care of the captains and I'll tidy things up here. Be careful not to let anyone get away. I don't want anybody sounding the alarm until after we're all done and we've gotten somewhere safe. Fighting our way out of this town doesn't sound like fun. We should all meet back where we left Patrasche and the other mabeasts sometime around midnight."

Elsa nodded. "Sounds easy enough," She murmured. "Are you heading back to the Great Hall then?"

"In a minute," Subaru said, walking away. "First, I need to pick up something at the store before it closes."

It was just after dark. Meili and Elsa hid in the shrubs near the enormous manor. The building was alive with lights and music. An enormous ball was taking place inside and the sounds of laughter echoed out the windows.

Six Guiltylowe sat patiently near Meili. The other mabeasts had been left to guard the earth dragon.

Meili looked concerned. "Big Sis, this is a *lot* of people," She warned. "It's not just a hundred captains. There are a bunch of local dignitaries here. Probably some armed

guards too."

Elsa nodded sagely but her smile was eager. "True but they're mostly unarmed. As long as we prevent them from fleeing and finding weapons or getting reinforcements, we'll be fine. The dignitaries are all fat old men and pampered noblewomen."

Meili looked dubious. "Well, what do we do first?"

Elsa glanced at her. "I don't know. What *do* we do first?" She asked meaningfully.

Meili sighed, knowing that this was a test. "We should... case the place and find all the exits. Then we should make sure to block them off so no one can get away."

"Sounds good. Why don't you do that?" Elsa said calmly.

Meili gave Elsa a dirty look but she sighed and proceeded to walk around the manor, hiding in the bushes to avoid detection.

OK. It looks like the front door is the only way in or out. The windows all look too high off the ground to jump out of without breaking a leg. I'll leave a Guiltylowe to guard the front entrance and the rest of us will rip up the party. Even without Big Sis, my new pets could mow down this crowd like wheat.

Meili returned to her Big Sis who sat patiently in the shrubs. "So?"

Meili sighed. "It looks like this door is the only way in or out. Windows too high to make an exit," Meili said matter-of-fact.

"So what do we do?" Elsa prompted.

Meili thought about it. "Well... We *could* just do a frontal assault," She said thoughtfully. "But that will give the people inside more time to react, to hide and fight back. It would be best if we could sneak in but there's no other entrance and there are two guards at this door."

"A window?" Elsa asked.

Meili shook her head. "Like I said, they're all pretty small and pretty high up. I don't think we can get in that way."

Meili pictured trying to coordinate her Guiltylowe into making a mabeast pyramid that she and Big Sis could climb up and reach a window. She quickly dismissed the idea.

Elsa shrugged. "Then we try to talk our way in and we get as far as we can before the trouble starts."

Meili nodded. "I'll leave a Guiltylowe at the front door," Meili whispered. "That should prevent anyone in the party from getting away."

Elsa nodded with an excited grin on her face. "Just follow me and back me up, Meili," She whispered. "This will be fun!"

Meili nodded solemnly and she followed Elsa out of the bushes. She mentally ordered all the Guiltylowe to wait in the forest for the time being.

Elsa pulled back her hood and drew out her long braid of hair. Then she walked confidently up to the manor entrance followed by the trailing Meili.

A pair of spear-carrying soldiers stood at the door, chatting with one another.

"Excuse me," Elsa called sweetly. "I hope that I'm not too late."

The soldiers' eyes flickered appreciatively over Elsa's taunt and mostly exposed body. "Of course not, my lady," One soldier murmured, talking directly into her cleavage. "The

party has just begun."

"We just need to see your invitation," The other commented.

"Oh, dear!" Elsa said in horror. "I hope that I haven't forgotten it!"

Meili rolled her eyes. *Why does Big Sis bother to play these games?*

The first soldier looked pained. "I'm very sorry, my lady but without an invitation, we really can't let you in. We're a province at war, you know. You can't be too careful these days."

"Oh, I quite understand," Elsa replied. Her face grew sultry. "But if you'd just give me a moment, I think that I could show you something that would convince you to let me in..."

"Oh yeah?" The second soldier said eagerly.

"We really can't..." The first trailed off.

Elsa stepped very close to them both. "Are you ready?" She whispered.

The second soldier nodded eagerly.

Elsa smiled. Then she jammed her daggers through the soldiers' eyes.

"Take a real good look," She whispered as each of the soldiers' one remaining eyes widened in shock and then rolled up in their heads. Both bodies slid to the ground without a sound.

Elsa giggled like a schoolgirl. She started to reach down for their stomachs but then shook her head. *No. I'm on the job. We'll play with entrails later, She thought. Once the rest of the targets can't escape.*

"Come on, Meili!" Elsa cheered as she sprang into the manor, daggers drawn. Meili ran after her, calling the mabeasts to follow.

Five massive Guiltylowe bounded up the stairs and squeezed through the front door. One Guiltylowe sat patiently outside, waiting for runners.

Inside the conversation and music suddenly stopped.

Then the screaming began.

"Hurry up and get that food out to table six!" The manager shouted.

"On it!" Subaru yelled back, bolting from the kitchen and carrying the tray out to table six.

The entire hall was full of people. Subaru had expected this. And he had expected this task to be fairly simple: Poison the sergeants' food and then slip away before anyone realized that he had ever been here.

However, things got complicated really fast.

After he had finished helping set up the enormous dining hall, Subaru had watched a huge crowd of uniformed men walk into the hall. They were tough and grizzled and had the general demeanor of military men. Unfortunately, a horde of small children also ran into the hall chasing one another around until the tables their escorts, a group of women in white robes that reminded Subaru of nuns, forced them to sit down.

Subaru swallowed hard and bolted back to the manager. "Hey!" He said, trying to sound casual. "Did you know that there are a bunch of kids here? I thought you were

just serving soldiers tonight."

The manager sighed ruefully. "I wish! No, the Sanshi army is sharing the hall tonight with the Sisters of Mercy orphanage. We had some extra space and we try to give the kids a good meal whenever we can manage it."

"Oh. That's... real kind of you, boss," Subaru got a sinking feeling in his stomach. "Um. And what food will the soldiers be eating compared to the kids?"

The manager gave Subaru a quizzical look. "They're going to be eating the same thing, genius. You think we have the time or the resources to make two different dishes?! Now hurry up and start busing the finger food and the appetizers out there!"

"Yes, sir," Subaru sighed.

Subaru's night had just become infinitely more complicated.

Meili walked beside her pet Guiltylowe as they wandered the second floor of the manor, looking for stragglers. Most of the guests had died to Elsa's blades and Guiltylowe claw and fangs in the first few minutes. The only people in the manor who'd been armed were the personal guard of the nobleman hosting the party and these ten or so indifferently skilled fighters had all broke and run when Elsa and the Guiltylowe stormed onto the scene.

They hadn't gotten far.

Normally, Elsa would have found such an easy fight to be boring but the sheer size of the crowd that she had been sent to slaughter was still amusing her. Elsa was upstairs digging the remaining guests out of their bolt holes.

Most of the guests had first sprinted to the exit and then run the other way when they found it guarded by a slaving mabeast. Some had pressed trembling against the wall and futilely pleaded for mercy until Elsa and the Guiltylowe had dispatched them. A few of the more resourceful captains had raced to the buffet table and grabbed the cutlery being used to carve up the large roast ham. Thus armed, they tried to make their stand.

This went about as poorly for them as would be expected.

Some of the particularly creative guests had either sought out places to hide or had barricaded themselves in small rooms and prayed for assistance.

While Elsa focused on digging the survivors out of their makeshift bolt holes, Meili wandered the halls looking for anyone still in hiding.

One guest had gotten the bright idea to try to take Meili hostage with a small pocket knife. He had managed to sneak up behind the girl and grabbed her, pressing his dagger against her throat.

Elsa had found this situation to be extremely amusing. The man had warned Elsa to stay away from him in peril of Meili's life and Elsa had stood there obediently. Sadly, the man was so busy threatening the assassin that he didn't even notice Meili's pet Guiltylowe silently padding up behind him. The mabeast had bitten the man's head off with a single chomp.

Now the manor was largely silent except for the intermittent screams of agony and Elsa's cries of delight when Elsa finally broke through another barricade and into a crowd of fresh prey.

Elsa was in no particular hurry to finish everyone off now that she knew they were trapped and couldn't escape. She took her time with each of them.

Now the manor was largely silent except for the intermittent screams of agony and mabeast roars when the Guiltylowe finally broke through another barricade and into a

fresh crowd of prey.

As opposed to Elsa who was finding tonight's work entertaining and delightful, Meili was fairly bored. She loved her Big Sis but she had never shared her fascination with murder and bloodshed. Killing had never been fun for Meili. It was just work. A messy and fatiguing chore that had to be done.

As Meili approached the rear halls of the manor, she found the tiny servant's stairwell. Meili watched as a man cautiously sneaked down the stairs. His clothes were so covered in gore and viscera and it was hard to tell if he had been wearing a military uniform or not. The man saw Meili and her pet and his eyes grew huge. He bolted down the stairs as fast as his legs could carry him.

Meili fumed and darted after him. She mentally told the Guiltylowe, who would never fit into this tiny stairwell, to go down the other way and head the runner off.

She heard the Guiltylowe thunder away.

"There's no point in running!" Meili chided him, struggling to catch up with the man but his much longer legs made this difficult. "One of my new pets is guarding the door! You can't get out!"

The man didn't respond and he started jumping down the stairs a flight at a time, scrambling to get down as fast as he could.

Meili was huffing and puffing. She wasn't used to running. She usually depended on the mabeasts to carry her where she wanted to go. She heard a tinkling sound come from below.

"Listen!" She called out between gasps for breath. "The more you... you struggle... the more awkward... this is going to be... for everybody!" She shouted as she finally stumbled down the stairs and into the manor's huge kitchen.

The kitchen was completely deserted. Food lay scattered around everywhere and a dozen torn and ripped up corpses lay on the floor in a sticky pool of drying blood.

Meili's attention was fixated on a small window that someone had broken. The kitchen wasn't completely underground as she had believed. It had a small window that faced out onto the grounds outside and now that window was broken. The edges were covered in fresh blood and a few thin blood trails led out the window and into the shrubs behind the manor before vanishing into the forest.

"Uh-Oh," Meili whispered.

This is great! What the hell am I supposed to do now?! Even if I wasn't being watched, I can't independently poison five hundred plates! But I can't just poison the pot either! I know every war has casualties and unintended victims but I'm not going to butcher a whole orphanage just for being in my way at the moment!

A cold voice whispered. You may need to accept some sacrifices for the greater good. Yes, your integrity does have value but what is the value of Emilia's life? She's vulnerable. You need to get her back to Siros in order that she be protected. To do this, you must destroy Griest's army with such resources as have been made available to you. A real man is willing to get his hands dirty to do what must be done...

Subaru shook his head violently. "Fuck, no!" He hissed to himself. "There's got to be another way!"

Then you had best find it quickly. The guests are finishing their appetizers. The main course will be served shortly. You won't have another chance after that.

Moreover, you should consider the values of these lives. These are orphans in a medieval society. Their lives are likely to be short, difficult, and full of misery. Would it truly be that much of a kindness to spare them?

Subaru hesitated, biting his lip.

"Hey!" The manager shouted at Subaru who was thinking hard in the kitchen. "Get out there,... uh, I never asked your name, did I?" The manager murmured.

"Lucas," Subaru said quickly.

"Whatever," The manager said more brusquely. "Listen. I need you to go down to the ale barrels in the cellar and start bringing the ale out to the tables."

Subaru's eyes widened. "All the tables?" He asked slowly.

The manager snorted. "No! The kids and the nuns aren't going to drink ale! Use your head! If the table is full of men in uniform then bring them ale!" He said, storming off.

Subaru began to smirk. "Right away, boss!" He called.

Subaru raced down to the basement as fast as he could, stopping only long enough to grab his bag from where it lay, piled up with the chef and waiters' personal possessions.

Subaru found the first ale barrel and forced the lid off. It was full nearly to the brim of amber-hued ale.

Subaru sniffed it and his lip curled. Yuck. This stuff is cheap! Oh well. It's easy enough to poison. The acrid flavor will mask damn near anything. But do I need to worry about anyone drinking it tomorrow after the soldiers are all gone?

Subaru slid into Reason and Judgment. The math is easy enough. This barrel is roughly sixty gallons. Each of those ale mugs you saw in the kitchen was 16 ounces in size and there are 128 ounces to a gallon...

Subaru finished his math and left *Reason and Judgment*.

If there are five hundred soldiers out there, each of these barrels will only get them a single tankard per barrel. Not only do I not need to worry about anything left over tomorrow but I had better poison at least two barrels to ensure that everyone gets a dose of the poison!

Subaru reached into his bag and carefully pulled out a bag of powder. Powdered mushrooms. Elsa helped me gather these and then grind them up. She claims that they're the most poisonous kind of mushroom in the world and they grow wild all over Gusteko. We were lucky to find such a huge patch of them. They're called 'Destroying Angels.' Elsa told me that less than half a cap has enough poison to kill a grown man. And we ground up hundreds of them...

Subaru carefully dumped half of the powder into the first barrel and the other half in the second. He then stirred both barrels vigorously to mix everything together and replaced the lid on the second barrel, just in case.

Then he walked over to the sink and washed his hands as if his life depended on it.

"Lucas!" the manager shouted down the stairs. "Hurry up! What the fuck are you doing?!"

"Coming! It took me a minute to get the lid off!" Subaru shouted, carefully filling the first mug with tainted ale.

Meili was perched on her pet Guiltylowe as she searched the forests out behind the manor in a near panic. After screaming up to Elsa about what had happened, she left her Big Sis to finish off the stragglers while she went to hunt down the runner.

She had only four Guiltylowe searching the forest because she had left two more behind to cover both exits, just in case.

Subaru is going to be furious if this guy gets away! What is he going to do to us?! If Subaru can fight Mother than we don't want to make Subaru angry at us any more than we'd want to make Mother angry! Subaru acts a whole lot nicer than Mother ever did but him threatening to kill Big Sis tells me that he can be equally cruel when he's given a reason to be!

Meili urged the Guiltylowe to follow the trail of the fugitive but as the blood trail thinned, the scent faded and the Guiltylowe roamed around in circles, roaring in frustration.

Guiltylowe are ambush predators! Meili thought mournfully. They don't track their food by scent, they pounce on it and kill it! Why didn't I bring the wolgarm and the fliers?!

Her Guiltylowe was sniffing the ground again when it suddenly found a fresh trail of blood. The Guiltylowe let out a roar to alert its pack mates and then raced forth through the undergrowth, followed by the others.

The Guiltylowe skidded to a stop when it realized it was just a few hundred feet from the city borders of Kocytos.

Deep in the city, an alarm bell started to clang.

Meili closed her eyes. "I am in so much trouble!" She moaned.

Subaru was bolting up and down the stairs all night, delivering drinks and refills to the soldiers. He not only emptied the first two barrels but was more than halfway through the third when Subaru finally decided to call it quits.

Alright. I've done what I needed to do and by some miracle, I've ensured that no one else will be affected by the poison. Time for me to get the hell out of here. Elsa said that it's a slow poison despite being extremely deadly. It's likely that the poison won't really kick in for hours but I don't want to take the chance of still being here when these soldiers realize that they've the walking dead!

The only disappointing aspect is that I won't be here to gather their lives as they die for Vitae. Then again, I'm pocketing twenty or so every day from the supply wagon raids. I just need some more sal-ammoniac to refine the Vitae and I can bottle whole Decades every night. That will keep Emilia healthy for a long time.

"Lucas! We need more ale!" The manager shouted but Subaru ignored him. He just grabbed his bag and slipped out the back door before anyone noticed.

He scurried up the back alley and then sprinted down the street. After a few blocks, he stopped running and strolled down the road with a smirk.

Actually, all things considered, that went amazingly well.

Subaru heard an alarm bell start to peel wildly in the heart of town.

He sighed. "Of course," He said helplessly. "What was I even expecting..."

"We're dead!" Meili moaned as the pair walked through the trees back to camp. Meili's new pack of Guiltylowe walked behind them.

"We're not... dead!" Elsa said more calmly but her worry was unmistakable.

Meili buried her face in her hands. "We let one get away!"

"But it wasn't one of our targets," Elsa argued. "It was some useless dignitary. The job was still done."

"Big Sis! The alarm is already sounding in Kocytos and the guards are searching the city for us. If Subaru gets caught up in that search while he's still in town, he's going to kill us! The alarm might have screwed up his plan or he could have been attacked getting out!"

Elsa bit her lip but then looked cheerful. "I'm sure that Master Subaru can handle himself," Elsa murmured.

"Big Sis!" Meili hissed. "Subaru already threatened to kill you! What do you think he's going to do when we screw up like this?!"

Elsa blinked and her face grew faintly sick. She cleared her throat. "Well... things go wrong on jobs. It's a fact of life. Master Subaru won't be... *too* upset about it."

"But what if he *is*?" Meili worried as they walked into the clearing where the other mabeasts waited.

"What if I am, what?" Subaru asked.

Meili's heart stopped. She turned her head and saw Subaru sitting casually by the embers of their campfire, petting Patrasche.

"So," Subaru said calmly. "How did it go?"

Meili glanced at Elsa. Elsa looked deeply unsettled.

Meili sighed. *Well, at least Big Sis appreciates the seriousness of this situation!*

Elsa took a deep breath and stepped protectively in front of Meili. "Master, so we killed... *almost* all of them," She began.

"Almost?" Subaru echoed calmly.

Meili swallowed hard and peaked around Elsa. "One... got away. I'm sorry. He wasn't one of the captains," She added desperately. "I tried to catch him but he got away!"

Subaru stood up and walked over to them. "Why did he get away?" He asked calmly.

Meili hesitated.

Elsa bit her lip. "Master, things go wrong-"

Subaru ignored her. "What happened, Meili?" He asked quietly.

Meili took a deep breath. "OK. So, we stormed the manor just like we planned. We left a Guiltylowe to guard the entrance and all the windows were up too high to jump out of. So I thought everyone was contained while we hunted them down."

Subaru waited. "Continue," He prodded her.

Elsa looked at Meili with a worried expression but it was clear that Elsa wasn't sure if jumping in would help or make things worse.

Meili sighed. "One of the party guests managed to get down into the kitchen which had a window in it that we hadn't noticed. He broke through the window and escaped into the forest. I tried to hunt him down but he got away..."

Subaru nodded. He turned and stared into the dying fire for a long moment. "Meili. What mistakes did you make tonight?"

Meili blinked. "What mistakes?" She echoed.

Subaru nodded. "We both know what you *did*. I want to know what you *should* have done instead."

Elsa frowned in confusion. "Master, I don't think hashing over this will do any good."

"Let me be the judge of that!" Subaru snapped.

Elsa and Meili both flinched.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Now I want an *honest* self-assessment of your actions tonight. What were your errors and what *should* you have done," He said sternly.

Meili shot a furtive glance at Elsa but Big Sis was sending her no signals at all. It looked like she had no idea what to say either.

Meili thought hard. "I... I should have surveyed the outside of the manor more thoroughly," She admitted. "If I'd known about that window, I would have been better prepared to head him off when he ran. Or I would have stationed a guard outside of it."

Subaru waited. "And?"

Meili wracked her brain for other lessons. "My pack didn't have the right mabeasts for this job," She said finally. "I brought all the Guiltylowe with me. Guiltylowe are great in a big fight but there was no one powerful at the party and Big Sis had the fighting under control anyway so a lot of that muscle was wasted. I should have brought a few large mabeasts just in case the fighting got out of control and then brought flying and tracking mabeasts to assist with reconnaissance and taking down any runners."

"What else?" Subaru murmured.

Meili squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment. "I'm sorry, that's all that I can think of," She said in a small voice.

Meili stood there trembling.

Elsa's eyes darted back and forth between Subaru and Meili, biting her lip.

Subaru stared at her for a long moment. "Hm. Very well. Now that you've made these mistakes, I trust that you won't make them *again*," He said firmly.

Subaru pinched the bridge of his nose and started to walk away. "Let's pack up and get out of here."

Meili's jaw dropped. "Wait. You're... you're not going to punish me?" Meili's face was a study in complete shock. The words were spoken before she could even wonder if asking this question was wise.

Subaru glanced back at her. "Everyone makes mistakes, Meili," He explained in a calm voice. "You don't deserve to be punished for them. You just need to work hard to *learn* from your mistakes. You got the job done. That's what counts."

Meili felt the world spinning around her.

She looked up at Elsa and saw that her face was equally stupefied.

"Oh, by the way," Subaru reached into Patrasche's saddlebag. He pulled out the stuffed tiger that Meili had been looking at in the toy shop. "I saw you admiring this so I picked it up for you while I was in town," He handed her the doll.

Meili couldn't have been more astounded if the Hierocracy of Gusteko had suddenly appeared in the clearing to offer her the Holy King's crown.

Meili slowly embraced the stuffed animal. "Thank you, Subaru," She whispered, tears streaming down her face.

"Um," Elsa murmured. "Do I get a present?" She asked plaintively, sounding much younger than she really was.

"How many toys did you play with tonight?" Subaru asked skeptically.

Elsa folded her arms across her chest and looked ready to pout.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Fine! I guess... you've done really good work for me over the past few days so..." Subaru reached into his pocket and handed Elsa a tiny bottle of blue liquid.

Elsa's face lit up as she took it and quickly drank it.

I can't be reckless with these. I have a lot of lives saved up but no sal-ammoniac right now. Still, once I have a stable supply of it, I can make all the Years I want so it seems safe to give Elsa this treat.

Elsa... had done good work. She deserves a reward...

Whether I like it or not.

Elsa closed her eyes with a sigh. Her face grew dreamy.

"How do you feel, Big Sis?" Meili asked curiously.

Elsa shook her head, smiling. "Better than I have in a very long time," She replied, looking fondly at Meili.

Elsa rubbed her fingers together with a look of wonder on her face as if she was just remembering how her own skin felt.

Subaru sighed. "Elsa, what time do you think it is?"

Elsa glanced at the moon. "Maybe eleven?" She guessed.

He sighed. "Alright," Subaru grumbled. "Let's get moving. We can't stay here any longer. As soon as those assholes in Kocytos are done searching the city for us they're going to get the bright idea to search the forest. We need to get the hell out of here!"

It was the middle of the night as Subaru and Meili rode away from Kocytos. A horde of mabeasts ran openly down the road.

Since they could expect most people to be indoors at this hour, the trio took the main road that hugged the Lagunican border back toward Stoneybrooke, assuming that no one would be out to see them.

Meili rode her Guiltylowe with the tiger doll held tightly under one arm. Elsa sat behind her.

"Now what, Master?" Elsa called.

Subaru shrugged. "You two should go back to the inn and get some sleep! We're going to keep attacking caravans tomorrow like we've been doing."

"Hey, how long are we going to be doing this?" Meili asked.

"No more than two weeks," Subaru shouted back. "By then, Sanshi will know what we're up to and decide to counter us. We'll need to come up with a new strategy before that."

"Like what?" Meili asked curiously.

"I'm working on that!" Subaru said.

An exhausted Subaru didn't get back to Nicholas's house until close to two in the morning.

Subaru entered the house. He tried to be quiet so as not to wake the girls but he heard them talking in the next room as he entered.

"I'm back," Subaru muttered, walking into the sitting room. "You guys shouldn't have waited up for me. It's lucky that I go home *this* soon."

"Subaru! Where have you *been*?" Emilia asked petulantly. "I was worried about you!"

Subaru sighed and bent down to give Emilia a kiss. She received it coldly. "I had a pretty busy day," He admitted.

"So, Subaru, what have you been doing all day?" Anri asked.

Subaru yawned. "Well, I had a pretty productive night. I managed to keep that second army from leaving Kocytos for the foreseeable future."

Anri's eyes were huge. "You *did*?!"

Subaru nodded. "I did. I'll give you more details but how about I give them to you tomorrow. I'm ready to collapse right now..."

Emilia nodded. "I think that we're all ready for bed. Subaru, are you hungry?"

Subaru shook his head. "I had dinner while I was out."

Elsa and Meili were laying in bed at the Stoneybrooke inn. Ironically, they were sleeping in the same room that Subaru, Anri, and Emilia had been in.

Meili was cuddling with her stuffed tiger. It was no Guiltylowe but it was the next best thing.

"Big Sis?" Meili whispered.

"Yes?"

"Does... something seem... kind of funny about this to you?"

Elsa giggled. "Can you be more specific?"

Meili struggled to put her thoughts into words. "I... Well... Subaru is... kind of strange."

"Yes. Absolutely," She agreed with a chuckle.

"No. I mean... I... feel strange... toward him."

Elsa chuckled. "Aw, Meili. Are you having your first crush?" She asked fondly.

"No! I mean... Maybe. I mean... I feel like... I want to please him."

"Hm?"

"It's almost like Mother. You know, when we felt desperate to make her happy? But this is weird because... I mean, I'm not... as worried that Subaru is going to hurt us. I just... I just have this weird urge to make him happy."

Elsa was quiet for a long moment. "I know how you feel," She admitted. "I've felt kind of the same way since we met him. I don't usually get attached to people on missions. I don't know why but... when he tells me to do something, I want to do it."

"Have you ever felt like this before?" Meili asked.

"No. You?"

"No."

They were quiet for a minute.

"Big Sis, are we in love with Subaru?" Meili said seriously.

Elsa chuckled. "Um. I don't really think that's it, Meili."

Meili thought hard for a moment then her eyes widened. "Big Sis. Do... do you think that Subaru put a spell on us?!" She whispered.

Elsa shrugged. "Maybe. I've never really cared about making anyone happy except for you before. I certainly never wanted Mother to be happy, I was just afraid of her. I've only ever cared about pleasing a few people in my life and never so much and never so fast. So this is definitely abnormal. Maybe he did put some kind of spell on us so that we'd want to help him."

Meili held her tiger doll tighter. "Big Sis, what are we going to do?"

Elsa chuckled. "Nothing. If he did put a spell on us, there's nothing we can do about it. And so far, I like working for him much more than I ever liked working for Mother. Maybe he put a spell on us to make sure we wouldn't want to betray him. Honestly, that's a far nicer way of doing it than constantly threatening us. Let's just ignore it for now. Try not to worry about it."

Subaru, Elsa, and Meili spent the next day guarding the road and ensuring that no supplies got through.

Once again there was only the single caravan that the trio slaughtered and then had nothing to do but lay around.

Meili lay on top of a Guiltylowe, cuddling with her ferocious monsters like a normal girl would play with a kitten.

Elsa was knitting a small moppet.

Subaru was doodling in the ground with a stick. It was late afternoon and the sun was beginning to set. Having already gotten rid of one caravan, they weren't really expecting any more but they kept watch in case of messengers.

"Subaru, what are you doing?" Meili asked, glancing at what he was doing.

"Hm? Oh, I was trying to design something," He muttered.

Meili climbed off her Guiltylowe, which gave a low growl of protest, and walked over to Subaru.

Meili squinted down at the complex picture sketched in the dirt and tried to process it. "What... does it do?"

"Well, I need to get some new equipment to make a special potion for Emilia. Unfortunately, that potion requires some very precise control in pressure and temperature so I'm trying to invent a machine that will let me create a vacuum."

Meili stared at the picture. "It looks like a pair of jars," She pointed out.

"Yeah. See, the chemicals go into the first jar here. And this second jar is full of water."

"But it's got a hole in the bottom," Meili pointed out.

"Exactly!" Subaru said excitedly. "See, when I open the bottom of *this* jar, the water will flow out and that will create a vacuum that sucks the air out of the first jar! I just need to add a tube to the second jar's hole and put its endpoint underwater to ensure that no air comes back up that way!"

"Um. Why would you want to do that?" Meili asked in confusion.

"Like I said, cooking *Azoth* requires very precise pressure and temperature. Otherwise you'll end up producing any number of other compounds that tend to explode," He said deprecatingly.

Elsa glanced at the pair with disinterest before returning to her knitting.

Meili looked faintly sick. "That sounds bad. But what does that have to do with water and air?"

Subaru thought for a moment. "Well, 'pressure' is a way of saying how... much air is around something. Different chemicals require more or less pressure and exposure to oxygen to be made properly. So using this device, I can control how much air is around what I'm cooking and that lets me make higher quality chemicals without blowing up my lab."

Meili didn't understand a word of this but she still found it fascinating. "That's so cool! So this will let you do that?"

"Yeah!" Subaru broke into a broad smile. "I love machines. I love building and making things."

Meili frowned for a long moment. "Could you... teach me?" She asked shyly. "It'd be nice to make something for a change..."

"Sure!" Subaru said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders with a huge grin. "I'd love to!"

Meili was somewhat off-put by the hug but it certainly felt very nice.

Elsa glanced up from her knitting. "It is getting late though, Subaru. We can probably head back."

Subaru nodded. "Good idea. I have a few things to do tonight anyway," He said, grabbing Meili around her waist.

"Subaru!" Meili yelped. "What are you doing?!"

Subaru blinked and noticed that Elsa and Meili were both staring at him in confusion.

He realized that he'd picked up Meili and had been halfway through hoisting the startled little girl onto his shoulder.

A wave of almost unbearable loneliness swept over him.

Subaru gently put the girl down.

"What's going on?!" Meili asked in confusion.

Subaru bit his lip and turned away. "Nothing," He said quietly. "It's nothing. For a moment, I just... I thought that you were someone else," He murmured, walking over to Patrasche with a heavy heart.

The next morning, Elsa and Meili arrived at the ambush spot shortly after dawn. Subaru and Patrasche were already there.

"Hi, Subaru," Meili said. "Another day, another caravan."

"Yeah. You guys are doing great work out here. But I have a little side project I wanted you to work on, Meili."

"What's that?"

Subaru made a face. "Elsa, do you think you handle the caravans alone for a day or two? 'No' is a very legitimate answer," He said with emphasis. "I don't want you to die doing this job. I'll try to be here as often as I can to help but I also have some other responsibilities."

Wait a second. When did I start to care if Elsa died? When did I stop wanting her dead?

Elsa stared at Subaru for a long moment, clearly mystified by the question. "I can handle the caravans easily, Master."

"I can leave a few Guiltylowe to support Big Sis," Meili offered. "She can't talk to them but they'll understand that they need to protect her and kill the earth dragons so that the wagons can't escape."

Patrasche snorted.

"My only concern," Elsa continued. "Is that I can't move the wagons alone. Even if Meili leaves me a few Guiltylowe for back-up, I won't be able to explain to them that they need to pull the wagons. And we *do* need to kill the earth dragons pulling the wagons. The Guiltylowe won't be able to outflank the caravan without Meili's direction and the wagons might get away."

Subaru thought about it for a minute then shrugged. "Forget moving the wagons," He said. "If I'm not here to help move them, just leave them where they lie."

Elsa and Meili looked at each other in confusion. "But, Master," Elsa murmured. "I thought we were trying to keep this operation secret."

"We are. But there's a limit to what we can do," He clarified. "The army has already gone 'no supplies' for almost five days. The absolute maximum we can hope to keep this secret is fourteen days and I never expected to keep the secret that long. We're getting ready to finish off the army. At this point, even if Sanshi finds out what we're doing, it probably doesn't have the time to counter us."

Elsa nodded. "I can handle it then. Especially if you'll be here to help me most of the time."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Let's do a trial run," he decided. "Elsa, you'll try to handle the caravan that comes this morning alone with the mabeasts and Meili and I will be here to back you up if something goes wrong."

Elsa shrugged.

Subaru hesitated. "Do you guys still have that money I gave you?"

"We haven't spent very much of it," Elsa replied. "It's a cheap inn."

"Maybe you guys should swing by Stoneybrooke and see if you can buy a tent, some sleeping rolls, and some food before Meili heads north. There's no reason for her to be uncomfortable while she's in the woods."

Meili and Elsa shared a surprised look. "That's... nice of you, Subaru," She said finally. "But you don't need to worry. I'm used to sleeping on my Guiltylowe and killing my own

dinner."

"I don't think we're likely to find those things in Stoneybrooke anyway, Master Subaru," Elsa said. "It's really... nice of you to think of that but we'd need to go to a bigger market to pick those things up."

Subaru looked mildly annoyed. "Alright. Well, I'll make a note of it for next time then."

"So, Subaru, what's the job?" Meili asked.

"I need you to gather up some mabeasts for me," He replied.

Meili frowned. "*Me*?! But you're a lot better at gathering powerful mabeasts than I am! I could only ever control one Guiltylowe at a time. If you hadn't ordered the other mabeasts to obey me, I could never have controlled so many strong mabeasts. I can only control powerful mabeasts if their horn is broken off."

"Their horn?"

"Mabeasts use their horns to communicate telepathically with their pack-mates. If the horn is broken off then I can interact with their minds."

Subaru frowned, absorbing all that. Then he shrugged. "I think you'll do just fine with this. I need you to go up north for a while. Do you know what 'Goki' are?"

Meili's face became faintly sick. "Yeah, Subaru. They're weak mabeasts that look like... cockroaches..."

"Right. I need you to head up toward Siros and gather up all the Goki that you can find."

Meili chuckled. "Yeah, right! What do you really want me to-" Meili trailed off as she saw Subaru's wry smile. "Are you *serious*?!" She gasped.

"Yup."

Elsa burst out laughing at the shocked and disgusted look on Meili's face.

Meili scowled at her sister and then looked up at Subaru with considerable chagrin. "Am I being *punished* for something?!"

Subaru shook his head with a rueful smile. "No! You're not being punished! I'm going to use the Goki to end the war but I need you to gather up lots of them first. A couple hundred would be good. A few thousand would be even better."

"You're going to end a war... with cockroaches?" Meili asked skeptically.

Subaru nodded. "I'll give you the details later."

Meili looked ill. "I *really* hate cockroaches, Subaru," She whined.

Subaru patted her head. "You have a group of ferocious Guiltylowe to keep you safe, Meili. You'll be fine."

Meili sighed. "Is there any particular size that you want?" She grumbled. "Goki range from an inch to a foot long."

"A little of each would be good but I think focusing on the smaller ones would be ideal."

Meili shuddered.

Subaru hid a smile. "Anyway, Meili, I want you to gather up all the Goki that you can find. Make your way northwest to Siros and set up camp there. Elsa and I will come join you tomorrow night and we'll use the Goki to finish off the army."

Meili shivered. "I don't know how you mean to do that but at least I won't be dealing with the cockroaches for very long," She said in a skeeved-out voice.

Subaru smirked. "Tell you what, if you do a good job, I'll buy you another bottle of that cream liquor you liked so much."

Meili's face brightened.

Meili rode off on her Guiltylowe to search for bugs.

Most of the mabeasts remained with Subaru and Elsa.

Subaru realized that Elsa was looking at him with an unclear expression.

"Yes? Is there a problem?" He said with an edge in his voice.

"Did you notice that she resisted taking the job?" Elsa murmured. "She even said that she didn't like it."

Subaru winced. "I hope she doesn't hate this job too much," Subaru worried. "I'll try to find her some of that liquor to make it up to her when the job's over."

"She'll do a good job," Elsa murmured. "She wants to make you happy."

Subaru frowned. "Huh?"

Elsa brushed dirt off her leggings and stood up. "You know, she still hasn't been able to process that Kocytos job."

Subaru sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Did all the blood upset her?" He sighed.

Why am I letting a little girl do these kind of jobs? What kind of person am I? I'm using Meili as a child-soldier to slaughter my enemies...

I know that she was trained to do this but I should be trying to get her out of that life. I'm taking advantage of her and that makes me no better than Capella...

"Don't be ridiculous," Elsa said. "Meili was raised by mabeasts. Human blood means nothing to her."

"Then what's bothering her?"

"I never said that anything was *bothering* her. She just can't make sense of it yet."

"Make sense of *what*?" Subaru asked in exasperation.

"You," Elsa said shortly. "We screwed up the mission by letting someone escape and we all know it. You let it go with a lesson so she'd do better next time. Mother would have tortured us and probably killed us. You even bought her a present and gave us money so that we can eat good food and sleep in a comfortable bed while we worked," Elsa continued matter-of-fact. "Now Meili even trusts you enough to confess she didn't like her assignment."

"*Trusted* me?" Subaru asked in confusion. "Why wouldn't she tell me that she didn't like the job?"

Elsa raised an eyebrow. "She trusted that contradicting you wouldn't end up in her being hurt or abused," Elsa explained. "She's off to do a job and I can tell that she wants to do a good job. Not because she's afraid of the consequences but because she wants to please you."

Subaru looked awkward. "Is there some reason that we're discussing this?" He asked.

"I know that you're going to kill me at some point," Elsa said dispassionately. "I imagine that I killed someone you love."

Subaru's face darkened. "Actually, you almost cut me in half. You only *tried* to kill some people I love," Subaru growled.

Elsa looked impressed. "Not many people survive facing me," Elsa said. "Although if you can fight Mother, I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised."

Subaru scowled at her. "Elsa, if you have a point, make it!"

"What do you plan to do with Meili?" Elsa asked pointedly.

"What do I plan to *do* with her?" Subaru echoed.

"You're planning to kill me when I'm no longer useful," Elsa said, sounding as if this was of no great concern. "But what about Meili?"

Subaru fumed. *This is so freaking weird! I'm talking to a psychopathic serial killer and I feel like I'm the one on the back-foot here!*

"Meili is mine now," Subaru said flatly. "My minion, my pawn, my student, my... whatever you want to call her. Despite my *innumerable* flaws, I take good care of my people. Anyone who wants to hurt Meili will answer to me."

Elsa stared at him for a moment and then nodded. "Good."

Subaru sighed. "Why do I feel like I just got lectured on morality and responsibility by an assassin?" He grumbled, rubbing his face.

"First of all, I'd like to remind you that I never really had a choice in my vocation, Mother saw to that. And second of all, what does my profession have to do with anything?" Elsa asked, sitting down and pulling out her knitting needles.

"You kill people for money," Subaru pointed out.

"Technically, we killed people because Mother told us to and she would have killed us if we refused," Elsa corrected him. "We never saw any money. Now we're killing people because *you* tell us to. And why do *you* do it?" Elsa asked calmly.

Subaru blinked. "*Excuse me?*"

Elsa didn't even bother to look up at him. "Don't try to highroad me, Master," Elsa said, continuing her knitting. "You've slaughtered hundreds of people in just the few days that I've known you. If you don't have a higher kill count than I do, it's purely because you haven't been doing it as long."

Subaru flinched. "I'm trying to stop a war!" He protested.

Elsa chuckled. "Do you really think that you're the only person who thinks that his murders are justified? Every client that we ever had would give Meili and I a long, boring speech about how they were the innocent, injured party in the dispute and that the targets deserved to die. No matter how little sense their claims made. No one ever seemed to grasp that we really couldn't have cared less *why* our targets needed to die," She said, knitting her moppet.

Subaru grimaced. "You say that like it's a good thing!"

Elsa shrugged. "Meili and I are like living blades. Someone tells us to kill and then we kill. We don't make the decision to kill so the morality of that decision doesn't really matter to us."

"How convenient," Subaru said sarcastically.

"You're the one telling us to kill these people so it's your problem whether these deaths are justifiable or not," Elsa murmured.

Subaru flinched and scowled at Elsa. "You're pretty damn cocky for someone who knows that I want to kill her."

"I've known hunger and cold. Torture and deprivation. Violation and pain. Death has *never* frightened me, Master Subaru," Elsa said calmly. "Close your eyes and it's over. It's quicker and easier than falling asleep. The only thing that ever worried me was dying at Mother's tender care. It being long and slow and painful. And you already told me that you don't plan to torture me to death as long as I do as I'm told. Trust me, Master, even if my remaining time on this world is short, I am completely content with the current direction of my life."

Subaru shook his head in disbelief. "What the hell is going on here? Two months ago, you nearly *killed* me."

Elsa continued her knitting. "And today we're sitting together on a dusty roadside fighting for the independence of a small city-state and discussing philosophy. Life is strange, isn't it?" Elsa murmured.

Subaru buried his face in his hands with a groan.

Late the following night, Subaru had what he fully considered to be the worst ride of his life. Not only was this a long ride through the dark forests of Gusteko but tonight was an absolute downpour and Elsa Granhiert was riding behind him.

"-And then I sliced through his small intestines. It was so cold that day that when his intestines burst, there was a gust of steam that warmed my hands!" Elsa recalled fondly.

This is awful. I mean, I'm not worried that Elsa is going to stab me, surprisingly enough. Elsa clearly knows that attacking me would be suicide and even if she somehow pulled it off, she's just dooming herself to a slow and painful death since I'm sure by now she's accepted that I'm the only one who can keep her safe from Capella.

Honestly, Elsa has adapted... unrealistically well to being essentially my... slave...

I guess they were telling the truth, being my slave probably is a step up from being Capella's.

All the same, Meili is definitely going to be the one taking Elsa back from here. I'm still amazed that I haven't thrown up after this interminable lecture on all the bowels she's opened over the years. I guess I've gotten desensitized to violence and gore and I'm really not sure what that says about me.

"Say, Master," Elsa asked. "How are we going to find Meili up here in all these woods?"

"She took some of my mabeasts with her," Subaru muttered. "I'm just homing in on them. They're very close. We're almost there." *Thank God.*

Meili stepped out from behind a tree. "Yeah, you're almost here," Meili grumbled, making Subaru jump and rein in Patrasche.

Meili looked up at Subaru with a moody, sullen expression.

"Hi, Meili!" Elsa said in a cheerful voice.

Meili didn't respond. Subaru thought that the girl looked a little haggard.

"Is something wrong, Meili?" Subaru asked.

Meili growled. "Subaru. You made me spend the past two days camped out in the pouring rain in a freezing forest with a legion of giant cockroaches for company and you're asking me if something is *wrong*?!"

Elsa giggled.

Subaru made a face. "Alright. Point taken. Let's get this over with so you can go home and take a shower or something," He dismounted.

"Sounds wonderful," Meili commented.

"Anyway," Subaru continued. "This army has had about seven days of no supplies, right?"

Meili nodded. "My Knickerbockers have been keeping an eye on the army camp."

"Where is the camp?" Subaru asked.

"Right through there," Meili answered, pointing at the woods just off the trail. "Watch the drop," She warned him.

Subaru carefully walked a few feet through the dense trees and foliage and found himself standing on top of a high ridge over a plateau in the mountains. The enemy camp lay spread out below him like a small city. Tents were everywhere and a few small campfires still burned in the rain.

Subaru returned to Meili. "Has Sanshi managed to get them *any* new supplies?" He asked.

Meili shook her head. "My fliers have listened in on a few arguments in the camp. It's hard to understand what people say when I'm listening through the Knickerbockers but I know that there's been no new supplies since we started ambushing the wagons. The soldiers are all on very short rations and everybody in the camp is freaking out. They barely have any supplies left."

"Perfect. Time to finish them off. How many Goki did you find?" Subaru asked.

Meili made a face and pointed behind him. Subaru turned around and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Perched in the trees around him was an enormous army of grotesque, red-eyed bugs of unrealistic size. They covered every exposed inch of a grove of massive pine trees. The smallest were about half the size of Subaru's thumb and the biggest was larger than his forearm. Thousands and thousands of bugs all clustered together in the trees, their coal-black bodies blending in against the darkness.

"Well. You've been busy," Subaru said.

Meili sighed. "Glad you appreciate that, Subaru," She sighed. "I searched the whole forest during our trip here and I found at *least* a couple of thousand Goki. Luckily, they're such weak mabeasts that controlling even a horde is easy. People think of them as pests, not a threat. But there's got to be twenty thousand men in that camp easy. What are the Goki going to do against that many soldiers? Maybe if we'd gathered up a few hundred Guiltylowe-"

"I doubt that there are hundreds of Guiltylowe in all of Gusteko," Subaru cut her off. "Ecosystems don't work that way. There aren't many apex predators in a given food-chain. Besides, we aren't going to use the Goki to fight the soldiers. We're going to use them to convince the soldiers *not* to fight."

"Huh?" Meili said.

Subaru smirked looking at the huge swarm of cockroaches. "*Pridebreaker*," He whispered.

Meili felt the Guiltylowe beside her shudder even though it wasn't the target of Subaru's magic and she heard her other mabeasts moan in remembered pain.

The Goki all let out a shrill, insectine stridulation, like a cricket melting in a campfire. Several Goki went limp and fell out of their trees.

Slowly the Goki regained their feet and they all turned to face Subaru and closed their red eyes in submission.

Subaru pointed toward the army camp a short distance away. "Go."

Subaru and Meili had moved out of the forest and found a bald ridge high above the plateau where they could watch the events unfold below. The camp was spread out before them and the city of Siros was easily visible in the distance, built like a mountain behind stout walls.

Elsa had found a tree that protected her from the pouring rain and she was sitting there contentedly knitting.

The only movement on the plateau came from the few sentries on patrol and a few campfires that still fitfully burned.

Subaru had ordered the Goki to wait in the forest below for his signal. Meili was waiting beside him to help him control the swarm.

"Meili, that's the mess tent, right?" Subaru asked, pointing at a huge tent in the center of camp.

Meili nodded. "The Knickerbockers have seen them gather there for meals."

"Alright, that's where we want our attack to start," Subaru murmured. "We'll wait until that sentry passes and then get a swarm of our army in there before the next sentry comes."

"Why are we sending them into the mess tent? What are they going to do in there?" Meili asked.

"Well, for one thing nobody should be in there this late so it's a safe place for the Goki to group up. But more importantly, the Goki are going to eat everything in sight or at least make it unsuitable for human consumption," Subaru replied.

Meili squinted at him. "Did I really need to gather all of these Goki just for *that*?!" She complained.

"That's only phase one, Meili," Subaru clarified with a chuckle. "That's just phase one. Here comes the sentry, get ready!"

Meili watched as a man carrying a lantern walked around the perimeter of the camp.

Normally, they would carry torches, Meili mused. But I bet they can't keep them lit tonight because of the pouring rain. There might even be fewer sentries on patrol than normal if they don't have enough lanterns. There's no point in having sentries out who can't see anything. That's got to be good for us.

The sentry came to the spot near where the Goki waited. He looked at the forest closely and then continued on his way, apparently noticing nothing.

"Go!" Subaru whispered.

Meili urged a vast horde of insects to stream toward the mess tent. She felt Subaru doing the same and the Goki obeyed, running, jumping, and fluttering into the tent.

I'm touching Subaru's mind through my link to the mabeasts now. I've never felt another human mind before. He's like... part of the pack. It's another human mind that I'm touching. I'm touching it through a mabeast but it still feels weird.

Actually... it kind of makes me feel... lonely...

Meili was pondering the strangeness of that sensation when Subaru whispered. "Stop."

They both cut off the stream of Goki, urging the ones still in the wood to hide and the ones in the camp to hurry into the tent.

The sentry came closer just as the last of the Goki vanished into the tent.

The sentry stood there for a while, looking around. His expression was bored.

"Subaru," Meili murmured with her eyes shut. "What do I tell the Goki to do? Just eat stuff?"

"That's a good start," Subaru agreed.

Meili thought hard for a moment. Seeing through thousand of Goki compound eyes was giving her a bad headache. Finally, Meili shook her head. "A lot of the food is in wooden crates, Subaru."

"Don't worry. Some of the foot-long Goki have already gotten into the mess tent."

"They *still* can't break open a crate, Subaru," Meili objected.

"They don't need to. Just have them chew a very small hole through the wood that's big enough for the smallest Goki to climb into. Let the little ones swarm inside and eat the food."

"Oh," Meili murmured, flushing in embarrassment. She gave the order and felt the Goki obey.

Meili closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"Are you alright?" Subaru asked.

Meili nodded with a pained expression. "Just a headache. It's hard to be in so many minds at once. Even minds as simple as the Goki."

"We're almost done," Subaru promised. "The sentry is leaving. Let's start the army moving again."

They continued this pattern as three more sentries passed by until the entire army was located inside that mess tent.

Meili shuddered at the image of a tent that must be simply alive with giant cockroaches crawling everywhere, perching on the walls, and gorging themselves on anything edible.

"Meili, do you think the food is all gone?" Subaru asked.

Meili concentrated for a moment, wincing at the pain of connecting to the swarm. "Yeah. It's either all been eaten or it's definitely unfit for human consumption. I don't think that they're finding any more."

"Good," Subaru said. He squinted at her. "Are you alright?"

Meili made a face. "It's... hard to be in so many minds at once."

Subaru nodded and reached into his backpack. He pulled out a small vial. "Here," He said, handing Meili a tiny vial containing a few grams of glowing green powder. "This is *Soma*."

Meili looked at it in confusion. "What do I do with it?"

"You eat it. It's a painkiller among other things. It'll cure your headache. It might also enhance your powers temporarily."

Meili hesitated. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Absolutely," Subaru replied.

Meili popped the cork, took a deep breath, and swallowed the powder.

She stood there, rubbing her forehead gingerly. Then she blinked. "Hey! I feel great!" Meili said in surprise. "My headache is completely gone!"

Meili's eyes widened. "Actually... Subaru, I think my connection to the Goki and my other mabeasts is way stronger now. I feel... I don't even know how to describe it! I've never felt so close to my pets. It's almost like... we're sharing the same body."

Sort of wish I wasn't dealing with cockroaches right now but it's still pretty amazing...

Subaru nodded. "*Soma* is very useful stuff," He said absently. "It purifies and refines your mana absorption which is probably enhancing your powers. Might want to remember this. If we ever need you to control a bigger crowd we should give you a dose of *Soma* first."

Meili reached out to the Goki. There was no pain now but the amount of sensory data coming from the mabeasts had increased a thousandfold. She was immediately overwhelmed, seeing through literally thousands of eyes simultaneously. She could almost feel the hard surfaces that the Goki ran across, scrapping the underside of their carapaces. For a moment, she feared that she would lose herself and be completely subsumed into this strange 'hive mind.'

Then it passed.

Suddenly, controlling the thousands of Goki was no more difficult than controlling her own hands.

"I'm ready to help again if you need me to, Subaru," Meili said cheerfully. *I actually want to try this now. I want to see how tight my control over the mabeasts really is now!*

Subaru stroked his chin. "You would definitely be helpful, Meili," He said finally. "Next I want you to tell the Goki to spread out through the camp and eat any rope they find."

Meili blinked. "Eat... the rope?" She asked in confusion.

Subaru smirked at her. "Think of this as a stretch goal. It will require more precise control. See, I don't really want the Goki to *eat* the rope. I just want them to ensure that they gnaw every rope they find into small pieces..."

Close to an hour later, Subaru was closely watching the destruction unfolding below. Meili was nothing short of astonished with the havoc that they'd wrought with a swarm of insects.

The entire camp was in an uproar. The legion of cockroach-like Goki that had descended upon the camp in the dead of night took the sleeping soldiers by complete surprise. The Goki had eaten all the food that they could find or at least defiled and despoiled it. They also sneaked into tents to chew at the rope supports, collapsing the tents on top of the sleeping soldiers and terrifying them out of a sound slumber. The soldiers had no idea what was going on, just that their tent had collapsed around them. They weren't sure what was going on or how to get out of the tent and that they were surrounded by giant cockroaches. A few of the largest Goki even dared to nip at the soldier's faces while they struggled to get to their feet.

The cockroaches would then all scurry away before the soldiers could organize anything remotely resembling a counterattack. While the damage that the Goki had done to the individual soldiers was negligible at best, in aggregate it could best be described as a continuing hemorrhage. The soldiers were racing all over the camp, desperately trying to deal with the army of cockroaches.

Unfortunately, swords and arrows weren't really very good weapons against an army of insects and the soldiers struggled to accomplish anything at all. They chased the Goki and flailed at them with their weapons or tried to simply stomp on them but they seldom if ever struck a solid blow.

When the soldiers formed up and tried to trap the cockroaches, the Goki simply dispersed, spreading out into another part of the camp to cause more damage. Subaru kept slipping in and out of *Reason and Judgment*, passing orders and tactics to the Goki through Meili's currently enhanced abilities.

Subaru stood still as a statue up on the ridge, watching the chaos unfolding below with detachment while Meili stood beside him.

Subaru was getting a bad headache from the over-reliance on *Reason and Judgment*. He's been using it more or less constantly for an hour.

Meili looked down at the camp in confusion. Meili watched as tent after tent collapsed like fallen trees, the Goki effortlessly chewing through the ropes that secured the tents. *I don't get it. Are we actually accomplishing anything here? I know those soldiers are all freaking out. Who wouldn't freak out if giant cockroaches were rampaging through their camp but the Goki really haven't hurt any of the soldiers as far as I can tell. What's the point of this?*

Meili tugged on his sleeve. "Um. Subaru?" Meili asked hesitantly.

"Yes, Meili?" He replied, not looking away from the army camp.

"I've just got to ask. Why are we doing this? Those Goki are giving the soldiers a bad night but I don't think that they've killed or even seriously wounded any of them."

Subaru didn't reply right away. "A wise man from a place near my homeland once said: 'You don't need to take away a foe's *ability* to fight. Just their will to do so.' Those Goki have devoured all the food that the army had left. What they didn't eat, they left unsuitable for human consumption. They've also destroyed all their tents by chewing through the ropes that held them together. You're looking at an army of soldiers with nothing to eat, no shelter from the elements, and who have gotten no sleep because they've spent all night chasing giant bugs through pouring rain and deep mud without any appreciable success. Add this all up and I think that their morale is probably floundering down there in the mud with them."

Meili digested that. "But... so what? I mean, whoever is in charge of the army is still going to order them to fight, right?"

Subaru turned to the little girl. "Meili, what do you think will happen if the general orders his men to attack the enemy while they have no food, no medicine, no rest, and no protection from the elements?"

"Um... they'll do what they're told or the general-guy will kill them?"

Subaru was silent for a long moment and rubbing the bridge of his nose. He'd been using *Reason and Judgment* more or less constantly tonight and he was starting to feel dizzy. "You're expecting the general to act like Capella." It was not a question.

Meili nodded.

Subaru turned back to the camp. "Meili, most people *couldn't* act like Capella even if they wanted to. Capella can only get away with threatening people like she does

because she's extremely powerful and nearly invulnerable. That general down there might be a good fighter. He might even have strong magic but very few people in this world can handle hundreds of soldiers rebelling against them and trying to kill them."

"You think the soldiers would turn on their leader?" Meili asked skeptically.

Subaru rubbed his forehead with a moan. His voice grew oddly formal. "If he pushes them to keep fighting while at serious risk of starvation, freezing, and sickness, be certain that they would. Mutinies have happened for far less and would not be unjustified in this case. These men have placed their lives in the hands of their commander, a relationship founded upon great trust and vast respect. This general has utterly failed his men. What's worse is that it's become very clear to me from where he has chosen to set up his camp that this general is nothing less than an absolute imbecile!"

Meili looked at Subaru and then back at the camp, frowning in confusion. "What do you mean?" Meili asked.

Subaru's face twisted in scorn, looking down at the camp. "This attack on Siros has been a virtual checklist of things *not* to do when pressing a siege! The only advantage that Sanshi ever had was raw numbers but that can only take you so far. If I had ever had a general like this under my command, I'd reprimand him for dereliction of duty at the very least! More likely demote him or reduce him to the ranks!" Subaru snapped.

"Huh?" Meili asked in confusion.

Subaru ignored her and shook his head. "Absolutely horrible tactics. They walked into an unbaited trap with their eyes wide open and the trap wasn't even set by their foes! They are trapped by accident and ignorance! From this vantage, they can't take the city and there is *no* way for them to retreat."

Meili blinked. "Wait. Why can't they retreat?"

Subaru glanced at Meili. He gave her a long, considering look. "Why do *you* think that they can't retreat, young Meili?" He asked in a strangely formal tone. "One is never too young to gain wisdom in the ways of battle. Remember: to understand conflict is to understand the fundamental nature of all thinking beings. Conflict is the engine of this world and nothing of any worth changes save through strength and the overcoming of adversity."

"Any fool can stand at the head of an army and roar to his men: 'Charge!' But should be lack understanding of the nature of conflict and battle, very shortly such a fool will cry out 'Retreat.' To finish your own evolution, *you* Meili, must learn to organize your troops with discipline and with foresight. Remember, Reason and Judgment are the qualities of a leader."

Meili frowned in confusion, trying to parse Subaru's dense speech. "Subaru, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have any troops..."

"Do you not?" He chuckled, looking down at the Goki who were ramping unchecked through the camp.

Meili's eyes widened as she grasped his meaning.

"It was an army of the weak that you assembled," Subaru said carelessly. "An army far inferior in both strength and in numbers but an army victorious! Cunning, Strength, and Tenacity has brought you victory in this matter as it will in all others."

Meili looked back down at the ruined camp, suddenly absolutely fascinated. *I never imagined how much damage a bunch of cockroaches could do! If Subaru had told me to destroy this camp, I would have told him flat out that it was impossible. I'd need hundreds of Guiltylowe and I can't control that many high level mabeasts. It was a*

struggle even to control thousands of Goki which have got to be one of the weakest mabeasts around. They're not scary, they're just pests!

But now we've used them to break a whole army!

Subaru gave Meili a slight smile. "If you are stronger and more cunning than your foe, you will win every battle," Subaru continued. "If you are more cunning but not stronger you will win *most* battles. If you are neither stronger nor more cunning than your foe, then you simply lead good men to their deaths out of your own foolish pride."

Meili stared at Subaru with something approaching awe. *Subaru's scheming has managed to crush an entire army! And he did it by just picking off wagons and with... bugs! We never even fought these soldiers! The army was far stronger than us but it didn't help them at all because their strength just didn't matter! This is genius! Maybe Mother really should be afraid of him!*

"You have not answered my question, young Meili," Subaru reminded her.

The words were gentle but Meili swallowed hard. Looking into Subaru's eyes, Meili suddenly felt like she was sitting with a different person. Someone who spoke with the sagacity of whole ages and was filled with unbendable purpose.

Someone that was unaccustomed to waiting on anyone, much less being disappointed by them.

Subaru turned his calm gaze back toward the camp in bedlam far below. "Why must this army surrender rather than retreat?" Subaru murmured.

Meili took a deep breath. "Well... they don't have enough supplies to make it back to Sanshi," She ventured.

Subaru didn't look at her. "A valid point," Subaru admitted. "But hungry men on a forced march walk all the faster."

Meili frowned. For some reason, she suddenly felt motivated. Meili *really* wanted to get the right answer to this question.

What is it... What makes them unable to retreat? Subaru said something about where they made camp. Maybe that's a clue?

Meili intently studied the plateau below her. "Well... there's only one road back down through the mountains," She said slowly.

"Yes," Subaru encouraged.

She frowned, thinking hard. "It's a narrow road. It's twisted and bumpy and it will take them a long time to get this many men down it?"

"Keep going."

Meili thought about it and her eyes widened. "They... The soldiers can't fight while they're on the road, can they?"

"Precisely," Subaru approved. "When the general orders his men to march back down this road, he has signed their death-warrant. As soon as the bulk of his troops are spread out along the road and are unable to come to the aid of their fellows, the rear of this army is vulnerable. If the commander of Siros is not an absolute fool, he will respond to this withdrawal by charging out to engage. He'll have far superior numbers against the only troops in any position to engage him and he will crush them easily. Then the Sanshi general will face an impossible and vain choice: whether to turn and fight or to continue retreating down the mountain. If he chooses the former he will simply sacrifice more troops to the red maw of the abattoir as, try as he might, he can not position his soldiers anywhere that their numbers can be put to good use."

"Should the commander choose to flee, his chances are still bleak. The Siros forces will continue their pursuit, attacking the flank with blades and harrying with arrows those men further down the mountain. Inevitably, the Sanshi soldiers shall rout and break ranks, each fleeing in desperation to save his own life and trampling their brothers in their haste to escape."

Meili thought for a moment. "Then... what *should* the Sanshi general do?"

"He must offer a sacrifice," Subaru said immediately.

"Huh?"

"He must atone for his blunder with blood paid to the God of War," Subaru said matter-of-fact. "The God of War holds no one to his service but he is by no means a lenient master. Having entered such a trap, whole divisions must needs-be sacrificed to hold the rear so that the rest of the army can escape. These men must be resolved to stand their ground in hopeless battle that will inevitably mean their deaths. They must do this so that their brothers will live. There is no escape unscathed from such a fatal blunder as this incompetently ordered siege."

Meili frowned. "Subaru, if the Sanshi general is so stupid, then why is Siros struggling at all?"

"Siros is not struggling against superior tactics nor masterful strategy," Subaru explained patiently. "But superior *logistics*, the lifeblood of any campaign."

"Siros acted rightly to retreat and wait for its foe to wither in the barren cold of this land. They could not have predicted how long Sanshi could keep the supplies coming or to what degree. I marvel at the expenses incurred during this campaign and wonder if this 'Malcolm an Griest' has emptied every treasury in his province to pay for this mad monument to excess. As soon as the supply lines were cut, this army was doomed. The rest is merely detail. The general will surrender or sacrifice thousands of good men's lives in a desperate effort to flee."

Meili digested that. "Then Siros had no way to win this battle if we hadn't come?" Meili asked.

Subaru laughed. "Of course they could! I remember a battle very much like this on the Inari Kush."

Meili blinked. "The *where*?!"

Subaru didn't seem to hear her. "My men were horribly outnumbered as we wandered through the countryside, closely pursued by General Katsuyori," Subaru said in a musing voice. "He harried my men until we came to high Matsuyama castle that was held by friendly hands, a massive fortress high on the cliffs, separated from the mainland by a narrow bridge across a vast gorge."

"Katsuyori dug in around Matsuyama to starve us out. He knew that by reason of its position and the sheer scale of its walls, Matsuyama was impenetrable to a conventional siege and thus he resolved to wait. With thousands upon thousands of men inside the walls, the food could not last for long."

Subaru laughed. "Wise fool! I had been peeling off and hiding whole *regiments* of my army throughout the countryside as we fled. I arrived at Matsuyama with no more than a hundred men and left them inside to endure the siege. They had provisions for long months and a hundred men is more than sufficient to defend such an impregnable palisade."

"Then I returned to my men in the countryside and we encircled Katsuyori. Still outnumbered, we attacked from the shadows, using hit-and-run tactics to savage his supply lines and to strike fear into the hearts of his men. Few of his soldiers were willing to sleep due to our frequent night raids. Katsuyori was certain that it was no

more than a few small forces in the country haranguing his supplies and picking off his scouts. To maintain lines of communication between many small forces would be nearly impossible or so he believed. Little did he know that our strategy had no need of such coordination. Over our many, long campaigns, I had painstakingly trained my junior officers to exercise the foresight of generals!

"By the time that Katsuyouri had realized his error, he was desperately low on supplies and now leader of a horde of angry, tired, and frightened men. He was trapped between my men and the sea with nowhere to turn. Helpless, he finally surrendered to me, both his men and his sword of command and with that, the Inari Kush was mine!"

Meili stared at Subaru, baffled.

Subaru chuckled fondly. "Katsuyori said that he was born a king, blessed with the 'Divine Right to Rule,' and a lion among men. Perhaps he was a lion. But I am a dragon and his proper place in this world is beneath my heel."

"Subaru! What are you *talking* about?!" Meili shouted.

Subaru blinked and violently shook his head. He rubbed his forehead in confusion, feeling as if he was waking up from a dream.

"Subaru, are you... OK?" Meili asked in a strained voice.

Subaru nodded. "Yeah. I'm... I'm fine." He took a deep breath. "Alright, enough playing around. It's time for the *coup de grace* and I think I've just located it. Go grab Elsa and tell her it's time to play," He told her.

Meili nodded and scampered off.

Subaru sat there with a confused frown on his face. *What the hell was that?! Where did those memories come from? A minute ago, I had absolutely clear recollections of leading an army on a campaign that took us halfway around the goddamn world!*

Now they've just... vanished...

I couldn't have gotten those memories from Daphne so... whose memories were they?!

Major Thompson was a career military man. He'd entered the service of Sanshi nearly forty years ago as an enlisted peasant. Unlike the nobles who were immediately given officer rank as soon as they volunteered to serve, Thompson had earned his commission in one campaign after another. These days his hair was white but his body was still hale. Most days he felt closer to twenty than half past sixty.

Thompson was the officer that damn near everybody in the Sanshi army respected. Nobles might hold untitled soldiers in contempt but they'd learned through bitter experience to listen carefully to Thompson's counsel and to avoid embarking on any plan that he derided as 'stupid.'

As the morning finally broke, bright and clear, Thompson felt like he'd moved well past sixty and was now pushing eighty. He'd never had an experience like this. Demon cockroaches had simply emerged from the forest by the thousands, biting, eating, and clawing everything. His men were well-trained and well-disciplined but they had never been instructed in any means of pest control. Thompson had no idea how to contain a legion of bugs and they had simply rampaged through the camp. By morning, the elaborate camp had been reduced to a sea of broken tents and ruined tarps, lying in the mud.

With daybreak, the bugs had simply withdrawn, moving off into the trees and leaving the men staring in shocked silence.

Thompson felt weariness right down to his soul as he trudged over to the large command tent, one of the only tents still standing, where General Hague and his colonels had retreated to try and make a contingency plan. Thompson could have told them that making contingency plans without first trying to contain the damage was a waste of time but after all these years in the service, he knew when to hold his tongue. In any case, the nobles were out of the way while Thompson tried to handle this disaster.

Thompson walked into the large and elaborate camp and froze in his tracks. General Hague was dead as were all of his colonels. Their bodies were bloody and in some cases seemed to have been nearly turned inside out, their entrails strewn everywhere. Each had a tiny, precise cut to their throat whose only purpose, Thompson realized, was to keep them from screaming for help.

A small scrap of paper lay atop their mangled bodies. *This army was destroyed by order of the Witch of the Wastes.*

Thompson was momentarily stricken dumb. Then he whirled on his heel and raced out of the tent crying out for assistance.

***Chapter 7*: Chapter 7**

That morning, Subaru rode Patrasche back through woods filled with a loud, droning buzz. He was followed by Meili and Elsa mounted on her Guiltylowe. The other mabeasts followed. Strangely, Meili had shown no inclination to dismiss her new swarm and the giant bugs drifted slowly through the forest behind them, flying from tree to tree and pacing them.

"So, Subaru," Meili called. "What do we do now?"

Subaru thought for a moment. "I don't think that there's any point in going back to the ambush spot," Subaru yelled back. "The Griest army is pretty thoroughly fucked up beyond any chance of recovery. Assuming that the folks in charge of Siros in Anri's absence have the *slightest* clue, they should have started capturing or demolishing what's left of the army as soon as the sun came up and they could see what's going on."

"So what do we do now?" Elsa asked.

Subaru shrugged. "For now we head back to Stoneybrooke. I think you deserve to take it easy for a bit. I've been running the two of you ragged for days."

Subaru realized that Elsa and Meili were both staring at him.

Subaru chuckled at their thunderstruck expression. "So, I'm guessing that Capella wasn't one for urging you guys to take it easy and pace yourselves?"

Meili shook her head. "She never gave us any 'time off.' The only time that we got to rest was if Mother forgot about us for a few days."

Subaru shrugged. "I'd like to at least be thought of as 'Better than Capella.' It's definitely faint praise but it's something that I'm really determined to earn. Anyway, you two have been running yourself ragged. You deserve a few days of rest."

"So what do we do now?" Elsa asked.

Subaru chuckled. "I'm still figuring that out. Let's meet at the ambush spot around ten every morning just to keep in contact for when new situations pop up. Oh, and before I forget," Subaru reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a small bottle.

He handed the cream liquor to Meili who took it with an expression of surprised delight.

"I hate the fact that I'm contributing to the delinquency of a minor here," Subaru chuckled. "But you did great work over the past few days and you deserved to be rewarded for it."

"Thanks, Subaru!" Meili cheered. A moment later she frowned. "Hey, Subaru, do you have any idea where I could find a little ice?"

"You're on your own there, kid," Subaru muttered. He looked at Elsa for a long moment.

She cocked her head curiously.

Subaru made a face and then sighed. He pulled a tiny bottle of blue liquid out of his robe and handed it to her. "You did a good job too, Elsa," Subaru sighed.

Elsa grabbed it and drank it eagerly.

Subaru watched as a scar on Elsa's shoulder faded away.

"Thank you, Master," Elsa said fervently.

Subaru nodded and looked away.

Elsa's been acting weird lately. Every time she drinks the Vitae she seems to be... acting less bloodthirsty and insane. Maybe somehow it's making her more into a person who was unruined by Capella's tender care. I don't know how that's possible but it seems to be true.

The sun had risen by the time Subaru got back to the house. Patrasche was dragging her feet when they returned to Stoneybrooke and Subaru wasn't feeling much better. He put Patrasche in the stable and praised her a little before letting the exhausted earth dragon slip off to sleep. Then, Subaru half-walked and half-stumbled up into the house. He heard the girls chatting in the sitting room.

"Subaru!" Emilia cried as he staggered in. It looked like they had just finished breakfast. "Where *were* you all night?!"

"Hey, guys," Subaru groaned, staggering onto the sofa and sitting down hard. "Mili, how are you feeling?" He asked, rubbing his eyes.

"I feel fine, Subaru. Thank you," Emilia replied. She rubbed his back. "You look awful!"

"Where have you been?!" Anri demanded.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Hey, Anri? Remember that whole war thing you had going on?"

Anri blinked in confusion. "Yeah?"

"Good news. You won."

Anri's jaw dropped. "*What?!!*"

Subaru sighed, struggling to keep his eyes open. "Yeah, the Sanshi army has been broken into pieces. I can't promise that you'll get a peace treaty out of this but the siege is broken and Siros is not in any real danger anymore."

Anri just stared at him.

Emilia broke into a radiant smile. "I told you you didn't have to worry, Anri," Emilia said proudly. "My Subaru can do anything!"

"How did you *do* that?!" Anri demanded.

Subaru groaned and lay back on the sofa beside Emilia, rubbing his eyes. "Some big bugs were involved..." He said on the verge of passing out.

"Huh?"

"Don't worry about it," He grumbled. "The point is that it's done."

"Then we can go home to Siros?!" Anri asked excitedly.

Subaru sighed. "No. Not yet," Subaru said with his eyes shut. "There are still a lot of Sanshi soldiers in the area. We should give Siros the time to finish cleaning house before we head that way. And also, give me the time to get some sleep," He added plaintively.

"Subaru, how long have you been awake?" Emilia asked in a worried voice.

Subaru chuckled. "Since the last time I slept here," He admitted.

"Gods, Subaru. Go to bed!" Anri exclaimed.

"Yes, Subaru. Go to bed!" Emilia agreed.

"I'm going, I'm going," He sighed.

That night, Subaru visited Lady Koi.

"Welcome, Lord Taiyang," Koi said with a deep reverential bow, her hands hidden in her voluminous sleeves. Senko, standing beside her, made the exact same gesture.

I've never allowed Senko to meet any of my allies but since Taiyang already knows about her, there's no point in being secretive. Besides, Senko clearly charmed Taiyang last time.

Such a clever girl. I'm not above taking advantage of her charms.

I need to keep Taiyang completely locked in my corner and he knows that. He's very deliberately given me no other option. As soon as Taiyang withdraws his favor, Zeno and Aperitif will do their best to kill me. For a time, it was even probable that Cynthia would assist them!

Luckily, I managed to work things out with Cynthia. She's still angry with me for drawing Taiyang's attention to the Coins but she's always been a sensible woman and she knows that we still need each other. I agreed to offer deference to her needs and concerns while I hold Taiyang's favor and am functionally in command of the Coins. She accepted the peace-offering and the entire matter was smoothed over.

However, we're both on borrowed time. The only thing keeping Zeno's hands from our throats is Taiyang...

Taiyang sat down on a chair in Koi's sitting room and Koi sat down on a sofa nearby. Senko knelt on the floor with impeccable poise.

Koi swelled with pride at her daughter's grace.

"Before getting down to business, Lord Taiyang. I thought that I would offer you a bit of refreshment," Koi smiled.

Senko silently reached under the table and pulled out a small bottle.

"A distinguished vintage from my own small collection," Koi explained as Senko gracefully filled two wine glasses. "I hoped that it might meet with your favor."

Taiyang lifted the glass and stared at it intently.

Koi concealed a frown. *Is he checking for poisons?* She worried.

Taiyang swirled the glass lightly then sniffed it. Finally, he raised it to his lips and seemed to inhale a small amount of wine.

"Carménère?" Taiyang murmured. "A very distinctive flavor of grape. A mix of grapes and plums and just a hit of oak. An exquisite vintage, Lady Koi. I commend your taste."

Koi stared at Taiyang in shock. "Very... perceptive, my lord," She said weakly. "Please, take the bottle with my compliments..."

Senko began to pour tea into two tea cups as well.

"Having offered you my divine protection," Taiyang murmured, "I assume that Zeno has been behaving himself?"

"Indeed!" Koi purred. "Not only has Zeno refrained from any more acts of aggression but I have made a veritable fortune smuggling goods to Siros as well as earning great favor with the city's ruler. My gratitude for your wise stewardship is immense!"

Zeno has pulled in his fangs for the moment but that won't last much longer. If I know Zeno, he'll try to annoy me in small ways and then grow emboldened when he isn't slapped down.

He's going to try to dare me to bring Taiyang into our personal squabbles. Asking Taiyang to reprimand Zeno for me is as good as telling Taiyang outright that I don't have the stones to keep Zeno and the others under control. Zeno is hoping that Taiyang will decide he made a mistake empowering me as his Hand and replace me with Zeno instead.

Cynthia and I made a plan to ignore Zeno's little offenses until he finally oversteps his bounds with something large enough that it could credibly interfere with one of Taiyang's plans. Then we can bring the matter to Taiyang and let him deal with Zeno.

My judgment of Lord Taiyang is that he's a ruler, not a leader. While he may desire lordship over the Black Silver Coins, he has no real interest in managing it. Any problem potent enough to earn his attention is likely to earn his fatal annoyance...

But that's fine. That's why I'm going to be so useful to him. He'll need a skilled lieutenant to manage these things for him. I just need to ensure that he continues to value me highly...

"Lord Taiyang," Koi continued. "I'm pleased that you've returned because I have managed to acquire the information you asked for!"

"Oh?" Taiyang said quietly but Koi could tell he was excited by the way he sat up straight.

"Yes. Securing this information was no small matter," Koi explained. "It required close work and considerable expense from agents belonging to both Cynthia and my own."

Koi heard Taiyang's fingers drum against the arm of the chair and cut herself off.

"The spirits you seek are located at the manor of Lord Roswaal near the village of Arlem," Koi said. "My agents indicate that Subaru Natsuki is not there and that no one knows where he is. His knight and several of his former companions are currently searching for Subaru Natsuki near Mirula and Lord Roswaal is still missing. The only known residents of the manor at this time are a small group of maids."

"Maids..." Taiyang growled.

Koi swallowed hard. *Is it my imagination or did the room just get colder?*

It's probably my imagination. I hope that it was my imagination...

Taiyang took a slow breath and handed Koi a tiny bottle of glowing blue liquid. "You have done well, Lady Koi. As such, you and your daughter shall continue to enjoy my protection from your enemies and my favor in your business ventures. The Witch of the Wastes is a giver of gifts beyond the power of Kings. Continue to serve so well and your rewards will not be small."

Koi smiled as she eagerly accepted the *Vitae*. "Thank you, my lord," She purred and bowed low.

Subaru returned to the house late that night. "Good news!" Subaru shouted ebulliently as he bounded into the room. "Guess who knows where the spirits are!"

"Really?!" Emilia asked excitedly.

"How did you figure that out?!" Anri asked.

Subaru hesitated. "Eh. Don't worry about it. Anyway, the spirits are back at the manor and apparently the only people there are Ram and... Rem..." Subaru trailed off in a

grumble.

Emilia scowled at the sound of that name for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and calmed herself. "Are you going to go rescue them?" Emilia asked.

"Of course I am!" Subaru snorted then hesitated. "But it might be a few days," Subaru admitted. "I'll need to send a spy to scope out the area and confirm that this isn't some kind of trap with Reinhard waiting to jump me the moment I walk in the door."

"Reinhard?" Anri asked.

"Reinhard van Astrea. The Sword Saint. He's... He was... a good friend of ours," Subaru sighed.

The room was silent for a moment.

"So what's the plan?" Anri asked.

Subaru thought for a moment. "I think I know the perfect agent to send."

"Agents?" Anri echoed. "When did you get agents?"

Subaru smiled deprecatingly. "You asked me to win a war for you," He told her. "Did you think when I leave here everyday I was just sitting at the local pub drinking my problems away?"

Anri rolled her eyes.

"Oh, Anri, one more thing. I'm expecting a package to be delivered today or tomorrow to that clearing just down the road."

"Why there?" Emilia asked in confusion. "Why not just have it sent to the house?"

"Because I'm not sure that I want the people delivering it to know where we live," Subaru said sweetly.

"Oh," Emilia flushed.

"Anyway, Anri can you keep half an eye on the place for me? I don't really want the stuff to get rained on. I'm not sure how well packed it is."

"Sure," Anri nodded.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Alright. So that's the plan. I'll go rescue the spirits and by then the Sanshi army should have been dispersed and captured. Then we'll head toward Siros."

The next morning, Subaru went to the meeting site on the Siros border. It wasn't long before Meili and Elsa appeared, riding on a Guiltylowe.

"Hello, girls," Subaru said as they dismounted.

"Good morning, Subaru," Meili said cheerfully.

"You seem to be in a good mood today," Elsa commented.

Subaru smiled. "Yeah. I got some really good news last night. Meili, you think you're up for another job?"

"Just Meili?" Elsa asked, sounding disappointed.

"Yeah. It's mostly reconnaissance," Subaru explained. "Elsa, you can continue your vacation for another day or two. Meili, sorry to cut yours short but I'll make it up to you later."

Meili shrugged, not much bothered. "So what's the job?" Meili asked.

Subaru took a moment to organize his thoughts. "Meili, I'm guessing that nobody in Arlem knows about your connections with Elsa and Capella?"

Meili nodded. "I didn't burn any bridges before I left. It's just good policy. Why?"

"I need you to go back there and do a little snooping for me," He explained.

She shrugged. "I can do that. But I may have some issues explaining where I've *been* all these weeks..."

"I have a plan for that. But we can talk about it on the road."

"Is this going to be dangerous?" Elsa worried.

Subaru shook his head. "It shouldn't be. My intelligence indicates that there's no one terribly dangerous there and Meili shouldn't be attracting much attention anyway."

Meili shook her head. "I'll be fine, Big Sis. I'll bring some of my mabeasts just in case but the folks there like me. They'll be happy to see me again. I can hide my pack in the forest."

"How many mabeasts are you bringing?" Subaru asked.

Meili shrugged and gestured toward her massive horde of mabeasts.

Subaru pinched the bridge of his nose. "Meili, you are not bringing six Guiltylowe, a few dozen wolgarm, and an entire swarm of goddamn Goki to Arlem!" He sighed. "There's no way you can hide that many mabeasts in the forest!"

"Aww! Subaru! I-" Meili complained.

"Take a few of them," Subaru cut her off. "The rest will still be here to play with when you get back! Take a Guiltylowe or two and a few other pets. That will sustain you for a few days."

Meili pouted.

Subaru rode Patrasche down the road followed closely by Meili on her Guiltylowe. Meili had taken two Guiltylowe with her and a small pack of wolgarm. A few black Knickerbocker birds flew overhead.

Well, at least Meili has learned how to balance her pack for different jobs.

Patrasche raced through the forest, followed by the mabeasts. Regular exposure had made the riding dragon more comfortable near the Guiltylowe but Subaru sensed that Patrasche would have still appreciated it if the monsters hadn't run quite so close to her.

"So what's my cover story?" Meili asked.

"You're going to tell everyone that you were taken prisoner by Taiyang," Subaru told her.

"Taiyang?" Meili repeated. "That witch that you've invented for Lady Koi?"

"Might as well get some more use out of him," Subaru said grimly.

"Um. But why would Taiyang kidnap *me*?" Meili asked. "I mean, why would he kidnap 'Meili the innocent orphan girl,' not 'Meili the mabeast controller.' Even if you want to say that Taiyang knows about my special power, I don't think we want the villagers to know about it."

"No. We don't," Subaru agreed. "Taiyang kidnapped you because you had information about Subaru Natsuki, his greatest enemy."

Meili squinted at him. "Subaru, why would you invent an alter-ego that wants to kill you?" Meili asked in confusion.

"Because it gives Taiyang an excuse to be invested in my life. If I ask Koi to investigate Subaru, she's going to want to know why she's doing it. She might even figure out who I am. But if she knows Taiyang wants Subaru dead, there's no issue. She understands why she's doing it and she won't be thinking there's any deeper meaning there."

Meili digested that. "I suppose that makes sense," She said slowly.

"Besides, Taiyang doesn't have a very long life expectancy at this point anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"The plan was always to use Taiyang to help me and my wife disappear. People will keep looking for me as long as I'm alive so I created Taiyang to 'kill' me. All we need to do is provide a few corpses, have Taiyang announce that he's going back to sleep and go silent, and we've tied up all the loose ends. Nobody in the world is looking for Subaru Natsuki anymore and we can disappear."

Meili thought it over. "That's... actually kind of brilliant," She murmured.

"Thanks, I worked hard on this plan," Subaru chuckled.

Meili thought for a moment. "So what happened when Taiyang took me?"

"His minions grabbed you and brought you back to his lair to be interrogated. You suffered terribly for weeks but were finally offered the chance to prove that you had value to Taiyang by going out on a mission. You escaped your handlers and then you returned to Arlem which was the only place you ever really felt safe and accepted."

Meili gave him a dubious look. "Subaru. You're laying it on *really* thick," She said critically.

Subaru laughed. "I'm just giving you a broad outline, Meili. Feel free to improvise as you please."

Meili thought about it. "The basic idea is sound. It should work. So what am I going to do there?"

"I need you to try to gain access to Roswaal's mansion."

"That might be tricky," Meili replied.

"They frequently hire the locals to do odd jobs," Subaru replied. "You can probably find a way to get inside using that. Once you're in, I need you to confirm if Beatrice and Puck are in the mansion. They're spirits that I love very much."

"OK," Meili said slowly, sounding slightly confused.

"Then we'll see if we can find a time when the manor will be empty or nearly empty."

"And then you'll come in and take your spirits?"

Subaru flashed her a grin. "And then 'Taiyang' will come and take the spirits. I have it on good authority that Taiyang is trying to locate them to use them as bait against Subaru. And when Taiyang is blamed for stealing them, that should confuse everyone into looking for Taiyang instead of Subaru and give us plenty of cover to get away safely."

"That's really smart!" Meili said in approval.

Subaru and Meili halted their mounts atop a ridge. The manor could barely be seen in the distance.

Meili slid off her mount and went to the road side. She began to smear her face and hair with mud.

"Nice touch," Subaru approved.

Meili flashed him a grin and then pulled some ratty old clothes out of her backpack.

She began to strip herself.

Subaru winced. "Um. Why don't I just give you some privacy for this?" Subaru said awkwardly.

Meili shrugged. "Whatever," She said with clear indifference.

Ah, yes. Raised by mabeasts...

Subaru turned his mount so he was facing away. "One more thing, Meili. I had Koi set up a message drop site near Arlem. It's in the bush right under the 'Welcome to Arlem' sign. When you're ready for me to come back, just leave a note under there that's addressed to 'Lucas.' Koi will ensure that I have it within a day or two and Elsa and I will come down here as fast as we can."

Arlem is on a major trade route with the capitol. Koi's men travel this road all the time so it was easy to tell them to watch for messages there.

"OK," Meili said. Subaru heard her pulling her peasant clothes on. "I'll set up camp for my pets near the river. You should be able to find them easily using your own mabeast powers. Let's meet there when you come back."

"Right," Subaru started to ride off then hesitated. "Hey. Be careful, Meili," He said seriously. "I don't want you to get hurt doing this."

"I'll be fine. It'll probably be easier than the last time I persuaded them to take me in," She said confidently. "They'll have even more reason to feel sorry for me now."

Yeah, maybe. Or maybe they'll just be more suspicious of you now...

Subaru frowned and took a deep breath. "Listen, Meili. If you have to bail, then bail," Subaru said firmly. "It's not the end of the world. We know where the spirits are now. If this plan doesn't work, we'll just cook up another one. Don't put yourself at any risk."

Meili's eyes widened. "Um... gee. Thanks, Subaru," She said, sounding uncertain how to respond.

Subaru kicked Patrasche's sides and she took off at a run.

Subaru got back to the house well after dark and found the girls waiting in the sitting room. He was both pleased and annoyed to see that the girls had waited for him before eating dinner.

Anri had gotten some kind of mutton dish from the local inn.

"What happened, Subaru?" Emilia asked excitedly.

"I sent out a reconnaissance mission to investigate Arlem," Subaru said, pulling up a chair and digging in to his food. He hadn't eaten all day. "OK, so we should have the info we need to rescue Beatrice and Puck in a day or two," Subaru replied.

"You got your package today, Subaru," Anri said through a mouthful of food. "It's a *big* box of white powder. I don't know what it is but you got a lot of it. I had a hard time

carrying it back here."

Subaru began to smile. "*Perfect!* We're almost ready to leave here so this is perfect timing. The army at Siros should be on its last legs in the next couple of days so I'll spend the next few days making as much *Vitae* as I can. I don't know how quickly we can set up to brew it in Siros so we need to have a sizable supply before we leave."

"Oh. Good point!" Anri murmured. "I didn't even think of that!"

Not to mention that now the war is over, I won't have many opportunities to steal more Years. I need to get my hand on that ebony stone and fast. As soon as I get the spirits out, Anri owns me answers.

"Aren't you going to bring the 'lab equipment' with us?" Emilia asked.

Subaru rocked his hand back and forth. "I mean, there's no way that Patrasche can carry all that gear. I *might* try to double back here with a wagon."

"I'll be happy to send some guards to help you, Subaru," Anri offered.

"Thanks but I don't even know if we *can* ship the equipment. Most of it is made of glass and that's hard to move safely, especially through the rocky mountain roads... Anyway, we want to be prepared just in case. Having a few weeks of *Vitae* on hand can't be a bad idea. It's not like it spoils easily. Right now, I want to focus on rescuing the spirits."

Subaru couldn't stop grinning. *Finally! Just hang in there, Beako! In a few days, you'll be safe with me again and then we'll all be safe in Siros!*

Zeno sat in his sitting room with a scowl on his face. For a man who looked and acted so brutish, his sitting room was a commodious area occupied by soft chairs and throw pillows.

He had been wise to allow one of his mistresses to decorate it.

Magic had healed his arm but the sting of his loss to Taiyang still stung.

The door opened and a man walked in with short orange hair and a small scar across his lips.

Zeno growled and put a small pouch of gold coins on the table. "What have you found for me, Gatz?"

Gatz sat down across from Zeno and grabbed the coins. "Koi told Taiyang about the spirits last night."

"You think he'll go for them?" Zeno growled.

Gatz shrugged. "Probably. I don't know but he seems really fixated on them. Beyond that, I did find a real lead for you."

"Alright, what is it?"

Gatz smirked. "Lady Koi asked me to deliver something to Taiyang's lab. Some... chemical thing. I was supposed to drop it off in a clearing outside of Stoneybrooke and then amscay. But I decided to hide nearby just to see what would happen."

"And what happened?"

"A girl came to pick it up."

"A girl?" Zeno asked sounding bored.

Gatz snickered. "I recognize that girl. I've seen her wanted posters. That girl was Princess Kairei."

Zeno's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit."

"I'm telling you, she is."

Zeno thought about it for a minute. "Taiyang is working with Princess Kairei?" He asked skeptically.

"I know it sounds funny but it does make sense. Some asshole calling himself 'The Witch of the Wastes' has been giving Sanshi a hell of a time lately. He attacked the Witch Festival at Kocytos and killed Griest's brother! Rumor has it that Taiyang even caused the Sanshi army to be devoured by a swarm of ravenous Goki! A couple of days ago, mabeasts and killers slaughtered a mansion full of people a few days ago. The next morning, hundreds of lower officers soldiers died in agony from poison. Taiyang didn't take credit for that one explicitly but most people are assuming that he was involved."

Zeno growled to himself. "What do you know about Taiyang?" He asked. "Where the hell did he come from?!"

Gatz shrugged. "He told Lady Koi that he's been asleep for centuries in the Elior Forest and he just woke up. He's trying to kill Subaru Natsuki."

Zeno shook his head. "Well, well. Isn't that convenient?" Zeno said sarcastically.

I don't believe that story for a second. He just randomly wakes up now so that he can hunt down and kill that jumped-up piss-ant from down south?

No. Something else is going on here. But every liar has a motive. What's the point of this lie?

It gives him an excuse to attack Subaru Natsuki? It lets him claim to be a witch?

Maybe that's it. Maybe he just wants to pretend to be as powerful as the old Witches. I can't imagine a real witch bothering with a syndicate like ours. Even the Sin Archbishops usually wouldn't care what we do. Although the Mother of the Assassins pokes her nose in from time to time...

No. This has got to be some kind of con. Yeah, Taiyang is powerful but my gut tells me that he's not as powerful as he wants us to think.

But what do I do with that? I can't take him on alone.

Zeno thought for a moment. "Gatz, how sure are you that this girl was Kairei?"

"Bet my life on it."

"Yeah. You have," Zeno growled. "Do you know where she's staying?"

"I followed her back to a house on the outskirts of Stoneybrooke. She only leaves to buy food. She seems to be holed up there."

Zeno slowly began to smile. "It sounds like the enemy of my enemy might be my old friend. Especially now that I have something to bribe him with."

Subaru had spent the whole day making as much *Umbra* and *Vitae* as he could. Late that day, Anri joined him in the lab. "Subaru, I'm really getting worried about Emilia."

He sighed. "I know. All that the *Vitae* is doing right now is a holding action against the Black Dragon Blood and the curse will start progressing again if we miss a single dose. But until I-

"Subaru," Anri cut him off. "I meant... emotionally."

"Huh?"

"Subaru. Emilia... I admit I haven't known her very long but... I feel like she's changed a lot since we met and not in a good way," She said helplessly. "When we spoke in the cottage, I felt like she was trying to be... more than she currently was. Now... I get the impression she wants to be... less. I'm worried that she's just... given up on herself."

Subaru frowned.

"You haven't noticed?"

Subaru sighed. "I noticed. I was just... trying to ignore it since I wasn't sure what I could do about it..."

Anri nodded. "I know how you feel... I've tried cheering her up but the thing is she doesn't seem depressed. Or at least, she won't let me see if she feels depressed. I care about Emilia. I consider her a friend and I don't have many. But I'm worried that Emilia sees me less as a friend and more as a... benefactor."

"I don't understand."

Anri frowned, struggling to put her thoughts into words. "Subaru, friendship is usually a union of equals. Two people who enjoy one another's company and care about each other. But I get the uncomfortable feeling that Emilia thinks I view her as some kind of charitable contribution. That I'm spending time with her and helping to take care of her just as an act of charity. Or it's something that I'm doing for you, to pay you back for helping me."

Subaru winced.

Anri sighed. "I'm not even sure how to address any of this. She never complains about it. Honestly, rather than frustrated, she just seems to be blindly grateful for any attention that she gets," Anri finished sadly.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I think... I think maybe we need to heal her body before we can heal her heart," He said uncertainly. "Right now, she's trapped in bed. We have to carry her to the bathroom! How could anyone believe us when we encouraged them to feel stronger and more independent in that situation?"

Anri nodded sadly. "I really don't like putting this on pause, Subaru," Anri replied. "Emotional wounds tend to fester even more than physical wounds do. But I think you might have a point."

It was quiet for a moment.

"So, when are we headed back to Siros?" Anri asked.

Subaru sighed. "A few days, I think. I picked up a message from my asset asking me to head over that way tonight. Hopefully, I'll be able to rescue the spirits. We should have plenty of *Vitae* to last us a few weeks now. Then we can head for Siros."

"Can Patrasche carry all that?" Anri asked.

Subaru made a face. "Good point. Maybe we should buy a wagon. Actually, a wagon would almost certainly be a more pleasant way for Emilia to travel anyway."

Anri nodded. "I'll start looking for a wagon. Do you think Patrasche will be willing to pull it?"

Subaru chuckled. "She'll complain about it. But I'm guessing we can bribe her into it."

Zeno sat at a table in a small tavern on the road between Kocytos and Sanshi. His men had paid for the use of the building tonight and then forcibly emptied the establishment if anyone balked.

One of Zeno's lieutenants, a dark skinned, heavily tattooed man named Farouk, stood behind the bar, making drinks for the others. Zeno sat at the table alone, draining a flagon of beer.

The door opened and Zeno's men all turned to it in sync, putting their hands on their weapons.

Zeno nodded once in approval of their training.

A bear of a man with a short, black beard entered the room followed by several guards. He wore a small circlet that stopped just a step short of being a crown and had a sword belted to his side. He looked at Zeno and his eyes narrowed but he did not appear to be at all surprised.

Zeno finished drinking his beer. "All of you. Get out!" Zeno ordered. "You stay!" Zeno pointed imperiously at Farouk.

"Your highness?" A guard whispered to the man in the circlet.

The man scowled. "All of you out," He said coldly. "All but *you*, Derek."

Derek nodded and took a step back, standing by the bar next to Farouk.

The man with the circlet slowly sat down at the table across from Zeno.

"Well," Zeno grinned. "Hello, old friend."

"Oh. Is *that* what we are?" The man replied dolorously.

Zeno feigned looking hurt as Farouk brought both men a flagon of beer. "Is that all you have to say?! We haven't seen each other since our novitiate!"

The man sneered. "Yes, our novitiate where you were dishonored and exiled for cheating in that grand melee and killing Master Gareth."

"Watch it, Malcolm," Zeno said in a dangerous voice. "Don't forget that you were right there with me, sabotaging that same equipment. If I *hadn't* killed Gareth, you would have been thrown out on your ear right along with me. Wonder if your Dad would have left his throne to a cheat and a backstabber."

Malcolm curled his lip. "And now you mean to make me pay for it?" He said in a dangerous whisper.

Zeno drained another flagon. "Don't be stupid," He said bluntly. "The two of us confronting each other would be a losing prospect for us both. We'll do enough damage to each other to make sure that breathing is the only thing the winner has over the loser."

Malcolm snorted. "What a high opinion of yourself you've cultivated. Tell me, are you still working in your little criminal underground?"

Zeno's face darkened. "I'm an underboss of the Black Silver Coins, Malcolm," He said in a soft, dangerous voice. "I have fingers stretched all over the continent. Unlike you, who is still stuck in this little frozen wasteland."

Malcolm scowled at him and Zeno glared back.

"Enough of this. Why did you bring me here, Zeno?" Malcolm hissed.

Zeno leaned back in his chair, crossing his enormous arms across his chest. "We have a common enemy, Malcolm."

"I doubt that," Malcolm grumbled. "The local lawman *works* for me."

Zeno snorted. "Taiyang."

Malcolm looked incredulous. "Are you *mad*?! Are you really taking those stories seriously?!"

"Stories?!" Zeno asked. "The man killed your brother!"

"Robert was a weakling. A charlatan likely proclaimed himself a witch in front of him and my idiot brother died from fright," Malcolm snorted. "This witch appears and just happens to attack my House? This is obviously all smoke and mirrors designed to obscure the activities of House Ithil operatives who poisoned my armies and killed my brother."

Zeno digested that slowly and started to smile. "No. Not *all* smoke and mirrors. Taiyang's real, Malcolm. I've met him."

"After how many beers?" Malcolm said in a bored voice.

"None," Zeno said flatly. "I saw him. He came to my home. He brought a horde of mabeasts with him. I punched him in the head and he didn't blink. Then he broke my arm with one hand."

Malcolm's brow furrowed. He might despise Zeno but he still remembered him as a fearsome and powerful warrior on the practice field.

Malcolm shook his head. "Do you really expect me to believe that some ancient witch named Taiyang has risen from the grave and is now targeting my House?"

"No. I expect you to believe that *someone* powerful is calling himself Taiyang. He's powerful and he's dangerous but he's using smoke and mirrors to convince everyone that he's more dangerous than he really is."

Malcolm leaned back in his chair, stroking his beard. "What's my interest in all this? I have real problems, Zeno! Problems that killing this 'Taiyang' won't solve! Even if he did cause most of them. Vengeance is sweet but it will have to wait until I tidy up the mess he made."

Zeno smirked. "If we can come to an agreement, I think that I can fix all your problems for you."

"Oh really?" Malcolm said with heavy skepticism. "Can the Black Silver Coins conquer Siros for me?"

Zeno snickered. "Probably. But I was thinking of something more basic. How would you like to know exactly where Princess Kairei is holed up?"

Malcolm gasped, his expression utterly shocked.

Zeno chuckled. "Here's my offer, Malcolm. You help me kill Taiyang and I'll lead you right to Princess Kairei. Then we can go back to pretending that we never heard of each other."

Malcolm frowned. "How do I know that this is true?"

Zeno looked at him in annoyance. "You really think that I'm dumb enough to personally lead you somewhere and then be surrounded by Acolyte Knights when you figure out that I'm conning you?"

Malcolm digested that. "I get Kairei *first*," He said firmly.

"Fine by me," Zeno replied. "Here's the plan. I have it on good authority that Taiyang goes off taking care of other business for most of the day. That'll give us a chance to get into his lair, kidnap the princess, and get set up. He'll be less likely to fight us if we have knives at the princess's throat."

"Taiyang is aligned to Princess Kairei?" Malcolm mused. "That has some interesting political ramifications."

"I couldn't care less about them," Zeno shrugged. "Anyway, Taiyang will come back there once his mission is complete to rejoin the princess. We'll be waiting for him there. You'll have sent Kairei away under guard and we'll kill Taiyang when he shows up. The Witch is out of my hair so I can control the Gusteko Black Silver Coins and you've conquered southern Gusteko. Everybody's happy."

Malcolm considered this carefully. "How powerful is this Taiyang?"

"Powerful enough that I'd die if I faced him alone," Zeno said bluntly. "No matter who he is and what he wants, he's a threat that needs to go down or he'll keep spiking our wheels."

Malcolm nodded slowly. "Very well. Give me the location. I'll inform the Witch Hunters that I have a task for them. I'll also bring Deann and her... student," He curled his lip. "All of us together should be more than sufficient to deal with this pretender."

Zeno smirked.

"What have you learned?" Subaru said two nights later as he, Elsa, and Meili sat in the dark woods not far from the manor. The sun had set a short time ago but the lights were still on in the manor.

Subaru had packed a few Years and a whole Decade of *Vitae* for this trip. It would allow him to reward Koi if her information had been accurate as well as well as Elsa and Meili for their hard work.

It will also let me bribe people if necessary.

The impromptu camp that Meili had created was situated on a green and mossy knoll next to the river.

Meili shrugged. "Well, Petra and the rest of the villagers bought my 'kidnapped by Taiyang who wanted to learn more about Subaru Natsuki' story. Petra still thinks that we're best friends," She said without a bit of guilt. "So when Petra got a job as a maid at the manor, I was allowed to go visit her whenever I wanted. I pretty much had free rein of the place. Ram objected to me being there at first but she seemed to change her mind one morning and stopped complaining."

"Petra's working as a maid?" He said in surprise.

Meili nodded. "Her mother's gotten sick so she's trying to make some money."

Poor Petra... I wonder if there's any way I can give her a few crowns. A couple of gold coins would probably solve most of their problems, especially if they needed medicine...

Subaru shook off the idea. "You found the spirits?" Subaru pressed.

"Eventually, yes," Meili replied. "A cat and a little girl who talks funny, just like you said. They seem to spend all their time in their moving library and they never come out. They seem pretty depressed."

Subaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Who else is in there?" Subaru asked.

"Tonight it's just Petra. Rem, Ram, and Fredericka had some business in the capitol for Lord Roswaal."

Fredericka, Subaru thought. I'd completely forgotten about her. She was the one who gave me Roswaal's message that lured me straight into the Sanctuary. It seems like a lifetime ago...

Strange that any errand required all of them. Especially Fredericka...

"Sounds easy enough," Subaru replied. "I assume that we can sneak in after dark?"

"No," Meili shook her head.

Subaru raised an eyebrow.

"Petra mentioned to me that they had some kind of magical alarm system installed. Anyone who tries to sneak in is flagged immediately and an alarm rings out in the village asking for help."

Good old Roswaal, Subaru thought sourly. I can fight off the villagers pretty easy but I don't want to hurt them. And if things get dicey, Elsa and the mabeasts are likely to start slaughtering people before I can stop them.

"I assume that the alarm doesn't sound if I go through the front door?"

"Not as long as you go through them before Petra seals the doors for the night," Meili replied.

Subaru thought about it. "Any chance that you could just 'accidentally' leave the door unlocked for me?"

"Sorry, Subaru. The door alarm is triggered by magic. Petra is on the list who's allowed to arm and disarm it but I'm not."

Subaru sighed. "Right. Why should things be easy? Alright, fine. The mabeasts, Elsa, and I will just break into the manor through the front door."

Meili nodded. "I gathered up some extra mabeasts from the forest. They're ready to support you." She pointed at the enormous pack of mabeasts lazing around the camp. "I'm guessing that you won't have much trouble getting them to do what you want."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Alright. Meili, go back inside and keep an eye on Petra to make sure that nothing messes up our plan."

"Like *what*?!" She asked incredulously. "Petra's idea of hand-to-hand combat involves pulling hair!"

Subaru sighed. "I don't know. Anything! Oh and here," Subaru pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and handed it to Meili.

Meili looked at him in confusion.

"Give that to Petra. Say that it's a magic healing potion you'd gotten from Taiyang before you escaped and you want her to have it. A sip of this will probably fix whatever is wrong with her Mother."

Meili sighed. "Do I have to, Subaru?"

Subaru blinked. "Huh? It's the perfect solution. If you give this to her she'll probably leave the mansion immediately to bring it to her Mother. Then we can just walk in and out."

Meili's face was stony. "Do you know what e/se she'll do?"

Subaru cocked his head in confusion.

Meili rolled her eyes. "She's going to cry. She's going to tell me again that she thinks of me like a sister," Meili moaned. "She's going to *hug* me!"

Elsa laughed.

"You'll survive," Subaru said dryly.

Meili made a face. "Hey, Subaru? I've been thinking. What about me? If I disappear again after all this, won't the people be suspicious? What if we need 'Meili' to come back sometime?"

Subaru chuckled. "I'm your exit strategy. Taiyang came here for the spirits but lucky him, he found a runaway too. Taiyang orders you to return with him and you obey because you're terrified that he would hurt poor Petra and the villagers if you ran again."

"Damn, Subaru," Meili said admiringly. "You're *good* at this!"

"One more thing," He added, pulling a sack about the size of a gym bag out of Patrasche's saddlebag. "If we run into trouble and we need to cover our tracks, I'll lay this down and light on fire."

"What is it?" Meili asked.

"Sylvite powder soaked in lantern oil."

Meili frowned at the bag. "So... what? Is it poisonous?"

"No. But it burns bright purple," Subaru said with a rueful expression. "If we need to run, we'll spread this out and leave a wall of 'Witch-Fire' behind us to discourage pursuit. I don't think we'll have much trouble convincing people that anyone who touches the fire will be cursed."

Subaru sat in the camp surrounded by mabeasts, giving Meili plenty of time to get back to the manor, give the medicine to Petra, and for Petra to leave the mansion.

Elsa sat under a tree knitting calmly. "Elsa, did you bring that mask I asked you to?"

Elsa nodded. "I brought it but I don't know why you wanted me to."

"There's a chance that we'll see someone here tonight who could recognize you," Subaru explained. "I don't want anyone to know that 'The Bowel Hunter' and 'Taiyang, Witch of the Wastes-'"

"Wow. We have such awesome titles!" Elsa chuckled.

Subaru gave her a patient look then continued, "I don't want anyone to know that we're connected. It might be an advantage someday that nobody knows that we're working together. I'd rather not squander that if we don't need to."

Elsa shrugged. "Alright. Fine by me."

Subaru nodded. "Behave yourself tonight, Elsa. Don't kill anyone without my direct say-so."

"I know, I know," Elsa sighed, continuing her knitting. "Are we going to get going or what?"

Subaru thought about. It had been close to an hour since Meili had left. Subaru took a deep breath and pulled up his hood. "Alright, let's go," He said.

Elsa put her knitting needles away and stood up.

Subaru wreathed himself in shadows and marched up to the brightly lit manor. Elsa and several mabeasts followed close behind.

This was home. This was where everything happened. This is where Mili and I fell in love...

And now I'm going to attack it and probably traumatize a little girl who was stupid enough to think of me as a hero.

As Subaru approached the manor, the lights inside the building began to flicker and grow dim.

What happened? How did I end up here...

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and kicked the huge door down. It splintered into a million pieces.

Far overhead, he saw the faces of Petra and Meili who were peering down over the railing in terrified dismay.

Shit. Meili wasn't able to get Petra to leave...

"It's Taiyang!" Meili screamed. "Run!"

Meili is one hell of an actress...

The pair sprinted into a room and Subaru heard them lock the door.

This feels wrong. It's necessary but... It still feels wrong...

Subaru slowly climbed the stairs, followed by Elsa and the mabeasts. Each floor that he reached, he triggered *Reason and Judgment* and scanned every door to look for Beatrice's library.

He found it on the third floor and raced forward with an excited grin.

He paused and turned toward the masked Elsa. "Wait here," He instructed.

She nodded once.

Subaru opened the door and stepped into Beatrice's library, discarding his shadow so as not to frighten the spirits.

The library was dark. It was empty.

"Hello?!" Subaru whispered around. There was no one in the library. All he saw was a single sealed envelope on Beatrice's futon that said: *Taiyang*.

Subaru quickly tore open the envelope.

Hello, old friend,

I was terribly sorry that I was unavailable to greet you in person. Unfortunately, personal matters require me to be elsewhere tonight. But do not despair. I am certain that a meeting between us can be arranged in the near future. Also, do not be too harsh on little Meili. It took significant effort and guile on my part to ensure that she did not become aware of my returning to the manor and absconding with the spirits.

Really, I found this entire venture to be terribly rude on your part. Did you really think to come to my home and remove from it these precious treasures without my permission?

Why did you not simply approach me to negotiate? I am certain that an arrangement could have been struck to return your precious Beatrice and Puck to you.

You may not believe this but you have no idea how proud I was when you managed to slip the bonds of my trap in the Sanctuary. I truly believed it to be impossible for you to escape but you have shown a nagging ability to make even the impossible seem feasible.

I finally understand your true capabilities. I never imagined that pathetic little fool Otto could have freed the Sanctuary under your influence. In many ways, I find this to be even more impressive than you yourself doing so. Anyone capable of taking my beloved teacher's trials and surviving with their sanity intact has the makings of a hero. But what could you call someone capable of inspiring a pathetic and broken little puppet to pass the trials FOR him?

Could this be anything else than the mark of a true king?

I laugh to reflect on our early interactions. When we first met, I had no idea what you really were. I knew what you held but not to what extent. I dismissed you as a witch or even as an archbishop! Can you imagine?

Truthfully, if I had recognized you for what you were on our first meeting, I might have killed you! There is a limit to what risk even I will accept and I would not want it said that I raised up the young dragon that later bit off my head!

But now I know what you truly are and this means that I am certain you are more than adequately equipped to see my dreams realized. I recognize that treating with you is very much like playing with fire but if I can only look into her eyes once again then let this wretched world burn.

Moreover, you are not only capable of restoring my beloved teacher to me but you can offer me a fantasy that I hitherto had barely ventured to dream of: the opportunity to stand beside her as an equal! I would give anything to see this come to pass.

I'm aware that you may have... misgivings about offering such an elevation to me after our, how shall we say, mixed experiences together. But consider this: to facilitate your own vision for this world, whatever it may be, you will require talented and loyal vassals to execute your designs. You are well aware that you can not in any way dispute my talent and my beloved teacher is above me. Loyalty is another matter of course but it is a small thing that can be enforced by a binding magical contract.

This is my offer: Restore my teacher to me and elevate me so that I may finally be her peer. Vow to ensure our safety and I shall restore your spirits to you and vow my eternal subservience to you in all your goals. I can assure you that my teacher will be equally willing to submit to your reign, purely out of curiosity's sake. She always found the very notion of you to be fascinating.

Truthfully, I am jealous.

Be aware that my Gospel is following you closely, Subaru Natsuki. Do not delude yourself into thinking that you can trick me. I assure you that darling Beatrice and dear Puck would be most dismayed should you attempt such a risky strategy.

For my elevation to be successful, it requires that I be compatible with your offering and that it be genuine. Do not attempt to mimic the the tricks done to those poor benighted Archbishops.

I confess that I'm uncertain which one will suit me best. I admit that I would prefer 'Despair' due to an unpleasant incident in my own past with its former bearer but who can say if I would be compatible? After all, what man truly knows himself?

Nonetheless, I am confident that you will figure it out and my Gospel will warn me if you fail to do your own due diligence.

I'll be watching you carefully, Subaru Natsuki. I can barely stand the anticipation. After all these centuries, the fulfillment of all my dreams are nigh. I'm sure that you're in a frightful rage right now but I'm confident that once you calm down, you'll realize that cooperation is the only sensible path forward.

I will find you when you're ready to fulfill our deal.

Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers

P.S.

Also, I deliberately left Petra in the manor this evening as a peace offering. I understand that you may have some cause to view me unfavorably but I know that you are fond of Petra and might wish to have her. I've yet to see you offer any significant attention to a grown woman. Instead you have given it all in favor of young girls like Felt, Beatrice, and little Meili. Given your fascination with young girls, I thought it quite probable that you would enjoy adding Petra to your collection.

Mistake me not, I pass no judgment in this regard. Life is short and we must all seek out affection wherever we can find it.

Do with Petra as you wish, either as a means to slake your lust or as an outlet for your rage at being outsmarted by myself once again.

I look forward to speaking with you soon, Child of the Unconquered Sun.

R

Subaru took slow, deep breaths, desperately trying to control his fury.

He stared at the empty library around him with flinty hatred.

He did this. He came here and he took my Beatrice away to use her as a hostage against me...

Out in the hallway, Elsa jumped as she watched the Guiltylowe all roar and cry out in dismay. They sensed Subaru's fury radiating out from the library even as he struggled to contain it. They flinched back from his rage.

Subaru couldn't remember triggering *Endless Hunger* again but it was active and its intensity was greater than he'd ever known before. The library didn't just become dark and cold, ice and frost flashed across the floor and walls like streaks of lightning. Subaru saw his own breath misting the air as he struggled to control his rage. The temperature began to fluctuate rapidly. The sweeping temperature changes in the library were so extreme that a powerful wind began to blow in circles around the room.

Once again that bastard smugly puts my loved ones in danger and all as a means to make me dance to his tune.

Tough luck, Roswaal. It's a whole new world now.

Anyone who threatens my family will die. It's just that simple. I'll find you, Roswaal. I'll find you and I'll give you oceans of time to regret what you've done.

You've just volunteered to be my sacrifice for the Anima. I'll pour the Azoth down your lying throat myself. I can't wait.

Subaru finally managed to more or less contain his rage. He dispelled the *Endless Hunger*.

He looked around. The room was now covered in frost.

Subaru took a deep breath. *Alright. So Roswaal is apparently 'watching' me with his Gospel-thing. Whatever that means. Where did he even get one? Is Roswaal*

associated with the Witch Cult now?

Subaru frowned in confusion. *Come to think of it... I don't really understand anything that Roswaal said!*

This is the story of my fucking life, my enemies always seem to think that I know more than I do! Couldn't everyone just assume that I know nothing for a change? It would actually be refreshing!

I have no clue who Roswaal's teacher is or how I could possibly reunite them.

Subaru had a brief mental image of Roswaal, Subaru, and Roswaal's teacher, whom in Subaru's imagination also looked like a clown, all sitting in a psychiatrist's office while Subaru played marriage counselor.

He wants me to 'elevate him?'

Roswaal, why not just tell me what it is that you want?! Why do I need to guess? What does it even mean to elevate him to his teacher's equal? Does he want a new title? I forget what's above a Margrave. A count or a duke maybe? Not that it matters. I'm not in the running for the throne any longer so I have no means to elevate him even if I wanted to.

No. He said it was my 'blessing' that he was after but that's even more confusing.

And what does any of this have to do with the Archbishops? He warned me not to try to trick him like they were tricked.

Who tricked them? And about what?

Alright. Fuck it. I'm back to square one. If nothing else, I'm sure that Roswaal will take good care of Puck and Beatrice. He wants me to do... something for him much too badly to risk enraging me by mistreating Beatrice and Puck.

I'll just have to wait until he makes contact again and gives me more information.

Waiting... Always waiting...

Fuck me.

Oh, Beatrice... I'm so, so sorry...

Meili's pet Guiltylowe sat in the middle of the hallway with a frightened expression.

Subaru opened the door and the massive beast recoiled from Subaru's shadow form. The beast turned its face away with a whimper.

Elsa stood completely still, shivering in the sudden cold.

"Where are they?" Subaru growled at the mabeast, trusting in its connection with Meili to tell the beast exactly where she was hiding.

The Guiltylowe bowed its head submissively and led Subaru down the hall. It gently touched one door with an enormous paw and then backed away from Subaru as quickly as it could.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable* and broke the door down.

The girls were hiding under the bed but Petra screamed involuntarily when the door exploded into the room.

"I sense something here," Subaru said in a hollow echoing voice. "Something... familiar... A small thing who believed in her blind ignorance that she could escape the

unimaginable glory that is Taiyang."

Subaru was almost enjoying this. He was so filled with blind hate right now that impersonating a monster and scaring children was even pleasurable.

There was whispering from under the bed.

With a heavy sigh, Meili crawled out from under the bed in spite of Petra's best efforts to stop her.

Petra stood up beside Meili, looking up at Subaru with tear-filled eyes. She was wearing a maid outfit.

"Foolishness. You are mine, child. Mine own. Mine chattel. You will *never* escape me..."

Meili looked all around the room, searching for an escape that did not exist. Finally, she slumped in defeat. "Lord Taiyang, if... if I go back with you," She said in a miserable voice. "Will you promise to leave Petra alone?"

"No, Meili!" Petra cried.

"The girl means nothing to me," Subaru said dismissively. "Return with me and I will permit your pet her freedom."

Meili nodded and started to walk forward with her head hanging low.

Petra grabbed her hand. "No!"

Meili looked at her somberly. "You need to stay safe, Petra. Your mother needs you. And remember that potion I gave you. It'll help you."

"Meili," Petra whimpered.

Meili gave her a sad smile. "Don't forget about me... OK?" She whispered.

This girl needs to be on stage...

Meili put an expression of utter misery on her face and shook off Petra's hand. Then she quietly followed Taiyang from the room.

Subaru's last look at Petra was of the little girl crying on the floor, her face buried in her knees and a small blue bottle lying beside her.

Subaru marched downstairs while halfheartedly pretending to pull Meili along by her arm. Elsa and the mabeasts came after, oddly subdued as if they sensed a mighty predator nearby and wanted to avoid its attention.

Subaru's rage was still visceral and it kept flaring up the more he tried to tramp it down. Subaru's wrath not only devoured all the mana in the mansion but drained the warmth anywhere near him and it started to snow indoors.

Again. Roswaal managed to trick me again. He managed to lure me right into his trap again!

I knew that I was going right into his lair. Did I take extra precautions? Did I do more investigating?

No! Koi told me that Roswaal hadn't been there and I just took her word for it.

I sent Meili into the jaws of the beast. Roswaal could have taken her prisoner too!

Not even all the maids being conveniently out of town tonight tipped me off! Everyone that could have given me leverage over Roswaal was gone. Roswaal played me like a fiddle.

Maybe I should tell Koi to find Roswaal...

I guess that's my best option for right now. Although I doubt she can find him.

Let Roswaal think that I'm powerless. He might know about Meili and maybe even Elsa but that's all he knows about.

He has no idea how far reaching my resources and powers have become. I'll be able to catch him by surprise.

He mentioned that he's never seen me paying attention to a grown woman. So at least he doesn't remember Emilia and should have absolutely no reason to pay any particular attention to the Elio Forest.

Then again, it's starting to seem increasingly unlikely that Emilia and I can disappear there...

Huh. I never realized that if you take Emilia out of the equation, the only people I've given lots of attention to are Reinhard, Felt, Beatrice, and the Arlem children...

Subaru reached the bottom floor and started to walk out through a huge broken door that was half hanging off its hinges. He noticed a small table next to the door. A completely unremarkable table that he'd paid not attention to before. All he remembered was that he often saw Ram and Rem polishing it.

Subaru scowled and marched over to the table. He triggered *Indomitable* and smashed the table to pieces.

Meili and Elsa looked at him in confusion.

Subaru gave the shattered furniture a vicious smile.

Obliterating the completely irrelevant table had been an act that was spiteful, petty, and pointless.

And it made Subaru feel much better.

The pair marched out of the manor and into the forest nearby. The mabeasts followed silently.

Subaru still hadn't said a word.

Elsa held Meili's trembling hand. Meili and Elsa both knew that something was very wrong when Subaru had no spirits with him but they didn't dare to inquire further until they were well out of sight.

As they reached the camp where Patrasche was waiting, Subaru finally dispelled his shadow and the freezing temperature faded.

"Subaru," Meili said slowly. "Did something go... wrong?" Subaru was no longer wrapped up in shadows but the rage on his face was almost more intimidating.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Roswaal came here," He said, fighting not to snap at her. "Roswaal took the spirits..."

Meili blanched in horror. "Subaru! I swear I didn't-"

"It's not your fault, Meili!" Subaru grated through clenched teeth. "Roswaal was one step ahead of us from the word 'go.'"

Subaru went to mount Patrasche but then he froze, trembling with fury. He clutched the saddle and panted for breath as his rage burned through him like molten magma.

"So, what do we do now?" Meili whispered.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I don't know yet," He said in a somewhat more composed tone. "All I know is that the clown is going to pay for his transgressions..."

"Are we going back to Stoneybrooke?" Elsa murmured.

Subaru hesitated. If I can't rescue the spirits then there's no point in hanging around in Stoneybrooke any longer. Anri needs to get back to her city and Emilia needs more care and attention than the two of us can give her. Some healing magic certainly wouldn't be unwelcome either.

What do I do with Elsa and Meili? Emilia will be happy to see Meili, assuming that I tell the girl to behave but Elsa will scare Anri and Emilia both to death.

Maybe I could send them ahead? They could clear the road to Siros. After the army broke up there could still be remnants in the mountains. A little extra protection won't hurt.

I can bring them back to Stoneybrooke with me and then send them ahead of us to Siros.

Finally, Subaru nodded briefly. "We're going back to my lab in Stoneybrooke briefly. Then we'll head onto Siros and settle in there," Subaru knew that his voice was still coldly furious but he couldn't help it.

"What are we doing to do there?" Elsa asked.

"I don't know yet," Subaru sighed. "You two should start by going shopping for a house for the two of you. Then you can stay close and have your own space whenever you're not doing tasks for me."

Meili's eyes widened. "A *house*?" Meili asked in wonder. Elsa seemed equally dumbfounded.

Subaru mounted Patrasche. "Yeah. I want you to find a place you'd like to live longterm. Then we'll buy it and I'll help you clean it up and make it comfortable. I owe you that much," Subaru grumbled.

Meili looked at Subaru in shock. She was speechless as she and Elsa climbed onto the Guiltylowe.

Subaru nudged Patrasche and they took off like a shot. Meili followed.

The next morning, Anri and Emilia sat in the master bedroom upstairs. Anri had come to help Emilia get dressed and get ready for the day but they had gotten sidetracked and were discussing one of Anri's books that she had lent Emilia. "Do you think Subaru will be back today?" Emilia asked hopefully.

"No idea," Anri sighed. "But I hope that at least he found your spirits."

Emilia nodded and her eyes grew watery. "I know that Daddy won't remember me. And he still won't like me very much. But just knowing that he's safe would be... such an enormous weight off my mind..."

Before Anri could reply, they heard the front door open.

"Subaru?" Emilia brightened.

"He's back awfully early," Anri said with a worried expression.

They heard footsteps on the stairs.

Anri went to the bedroom door and then back slowly away, her face pale.

A handsome man with long blond hair and a sardonic expression walked slowly into the room. He had a sword belted at his side and he wore a tabard over his breastplate.

"Hello, Princess," The man smirked. "My, my, most of Gusteko has been looking for you."

Anri took a deep breath. "I fail to see how that would involve the Witch Hunters, Gilbert de Ray."

"Witch Hunters?!" Emilia gasped. She desperately tried to reach out for her magic but it didn't respond. The Black Dragon Blood's curse still blocked it. She tried to climb out of bed but her legs refused to cooperate. More men came into the room.

"Really?" Gilbert mused. "I have it on good authority that you have been dealing with some very bad people recently. Does that ring a bell? Foreigners, demi-humans, and witches?"

Anri scowled. "Good authority?! You heard that directly from Malcolm an Griest. Did you even bother to get any corroborating evidence of his accusations?!"

Gilbert gave Anri an amused look. "Corroborate what? That you're associating with foreign scum? I can see evidence of that before my own eyes. Worse, you appear to be cohabitating with demi-humans and bringing foreigners into Gusteko politics. It's hardly a surprise that a House accursed should fall so readily into corruption. The Holy King was a fool to restore your standing but such matters are easily rectified."

Anri took a deep breath. "Then you'll deliver me to the Basilica so that these 'charges' can be investigated?" Anri asked calmly.

"Hm? Oh no, Princess. I don't think so. That would really be inconvenient. I'll have to find someplace closer to drop you off while I track down and deal with this 'Taiyang.' I imagine that Sanshi will serve."

Anri's expression was enraged. "You're supposed to be working for the Church, not for House Griest! How can you justify taking a nakedly partisan position in the war?"

"My position isn't partisan at all, Kairei," Gilbert said flatly. "I am engaged in the holy calling of defending fair Gusteko from all who would seek to defile it. I simply make allies where I find them. Malcolm an Griest and I share the exact same goal: The destruction of a House that shames all of Gusteko by its ill repute."

Anri turned pale.

"Where is Taiyang?" He asked.

Anri and Emilia looked at each other in confusion. "Who?" Anri asked.

"Don't insult my intelligence," Gilbert snorted.

"I'll do my best but it's not easy," Anri said, folding her arms across her chest as two large guards took Anri by the shoulders. "I don't know who 'Taiyang' is and I don't know where he is. Pity. Looks like you're just stuck with me."

"And your little friend," Gilbert pointed toward Emilia. A soldier marched over to the bedridden elf with a faintly nauseous look on his face as if he were about to touch something filthy.

"She has *nothing* to do with any of this! There's no reason to take her prisoner!" Anri shouted.

"She's not a prisoner, Princess," Gilbert shrugged. "She's *evidence*. Evidence of your crimes and of your miscegenation."

Anri huffed as the soldiers began to drag her from the room. "We're both women so I doubt that you know what that word means, Gilbert! Leave her alone! She's useless to you. She can't even walk right now."

Gilbert sniffed. "You're right about one thing. She is *utterly* useless," He agreed. He looked at the guard. "Take her. *Drag* her down the stairs if you have to."

Emilia was seized under one arm. She beat at the man's chest with her fists but with no mana to boost her strength, her blows were insignificant. The soldier responded with a backhanded slap across Emilia's face that landed with stunning force and left her in a daze.

Emilia could barely move as the soldier dragged her out of bed, clad only in a thin shift. Emilia bit her lip against crying out in pain as she was dragged down the staircase. Her useless legs hit every step.

Anri and Emilia were dragged to a carriage. An enormous tattooed man stood beside it.

Anri checked her satchel. At least she'd managed to rescue some of Emilia's medicine before they dragged her out of the house.

"Hm," The enormous man snorted, taking a long leer at Emilia. "If you lot don't want that one, I'll take her," She said with an evil smirk.

"They're all going back to Sanshi," A guard said firmly.

Zeno shrugged, not much bothered by this.

The guard picked up Emilia and all but threw her limp body into the carriage.

Emilia landed hard with a yelp.

"Hey!" Anri protested.

"Princess!" A voice called.

Anri sighed and turned around, her hands folded behind her back and her chin raised up imperiously as a bear of a man with a large black beard approached. He had a vicious smirk on his face. "Princess, how lovely to see you again. I've been looking all over for you."

"So I've gathered, Malcolm," She said pointedly. "Sorry. I would have come to see you but I was too busy dismantling your armies."

Malcolm's face twisted in fury but his smile came back quickly. "A setback to be sure but in the end, you've lost and I've won. You will be my prisoner here until Siros agrees to submit. And then, *you*, my dear 'Frost Queen,' will be executed."

Anri pursed her lips, refusing to allow Malcolm to see her quail.

Malcolm snorted. "Put her in the carriage and let's get moving."

"Yes, sir," The guard replied, forcing Anri into the carriage and locking the door.

Zeno snorted. "Well, looks like you're finally the ruler of southern Gusteko, Malcolm," He drawled. "What are you going to do next?"

"That is not your concern," Malcolm said coldly. "You are dismissed."

Zeno's face darkened. "*Excuse* me?" He growled.

"We will deal with this 'Taiyang,'" Malcolm said. "You can scurry back to whatever roach-hole you usually reside in."

Zeno bared his teeth but he pondered the situation carefully. Despite his thuggish appearance, Zeno was quick-witted and strategic.

Zeno didn't especially want to kill Taiyang personally, he just wanted him dead. If Malcolm could kill him, great. If Malcolm failed to kill him and Zeno wasn't here when it happened, there was a very real possibility that Zeno's perfidy would never come to light. He could plead ignorance, wait and scheme, and come up with another plan.

Finally, Zeno shrugged. "Whatever," He said, walking away. His lieutenant Farouk and a handful of his best men, waited by a carriage nearby.

"Farouk," Zeno muttered.

His lieutenant flew to his side. "Yes, boss?"

"Change of plans," Zeno growled. "We're leaving."

"We... are?" Farouk asked in confusion.

Zeno snorted. "Send out the word to all our forces. Execute plan 'fox hunt.'"

Malcolm watched Zeno climb into his carriage and trundle away.

Malcolm snorted and then dismissed his old ally from mind. "The princess and I depart for Sanshi immediately," Malcolm called to Deann. He lowered his voice as he approached her. "Daughter, I have received new... intelligence. This 'Taiyang' may arrive here by nightfall. Wait here for him."

Gilbert approached them with a frown. "What is this... intelligence?" Gilbert asked slowly.

"That is not your concern. It is reliable intelligence, you may be certain of that," Malcolm said firmly. He turned back to Deann. "Daughter, wait here until nightfall. Just in case Taiyang does appear. If he does, teach him a lesson for meddling in our affairs."

Deann nodded solemnly.

Malcolm climbed into another carriage and rolled away, followed by the carriage containing the princess.

"Nice of him to stay and help," Duncan muttered to Deann.

Deann pretended deafness and didn't respond.

Duncan heard the Witch Hunters cheering and turned around.

He stared in near shock as the hunters tossed burning torches onto the house and set it ablaze.

"What the devil are you doing?!" Duncan demanded, racing over to Gilbert.

Gilbert looked quizzically at Duncan. "Burning a witch's hut."

"First of all," Duncan grated. "We're supposed to be sitting here and waiting to *ambush* this witch. A burning house is a beacon signal that can be seen for miles around that just *screams* something is very wrong and to stay away! Secondly, what do you plan to do if the fire spreads through this forest? There's a village a few miles away!"

Gilbert frowned and thought about it for a minute. "Don't... don't be a killjoy," Gilbert said finally. "My men are having fun."

Duncan scowled at Gilbert who resolutely turned his back on him.

Duncan grabbed his mace tightly and he fought not to bring it down on Gilbert's head. Then he slowly took his hand off his weapon and marched back over to Deann.

"Please give me my bag!" Anri fumed at the guard when they stopped to rest the dragons and eat lunch. The soldiers had made a small fire and were preparing a quick meal.

"What's going on here?" Malcolm muttered, walking over to Anri.

The guard turned and bowed to the prince.

Anri closed her eyes and steadied herself. "Prince Malcolm," Anri said slowly. "My companion is very sick. She needs the medicine in my satchel. Surely you wouldn't deny her that?"

Malcolm smirked at her. "Where is this medicine?"

Anri felt uncomfortable but she had no choice but to play ball. "It's in my satchel over there." She pointed out to where a guard had secured her bag.

Malcolm walked over to her satchel and took out a bottle of *Vitae* the size of a thermos. "What is this?" He murmured in confusion.

"Medicine," Anri said again. "Please. My companion has done *nothing* to you. She's just my... servant. There's no reason to make her suffer because of your grievances against me."

Malcolm walked back toward the campfire with a thoughtful expression on his face. "You are correct," He admitted. "Your servant has done nothing to me. Other than choose an inept princess to serve," He amended as he strode around the area, surrounded by his guards.

Malcolm pulled the cork out of the bottle and casually poured the *Vitae* out into the dirt.

Anri gasped. "What are you *doing*?!" She rushed over trying to stop him but the guard held her back.

Malcolm poured out the entire quantity and shook the bottle a few times for good measure. He then walked back and handed the empty bottle to the horrified Anri.

"I'm making a statement," Malcolm said pleasantly. "You see, *whom* you choose to serve has consequences. In this case, your people chose to serve and follow an idiotic princess of an accursed bloodline. You've led your people to utter ruin but it's so hard to make that revelation visceral to you. So, please watch your companion slowly die while you're helpless to prevent it. That should give you perspective on what an inept leader you really were. You failed to save your city, your guards, and even your friends. History will vindicate me for my war to preserve Gusteko's purity."

Anri again tried to throw herself at him but the guard held her back. "Be honest with me at least, Malcolm," She hissed at him through clenched teeth. "Our war has nothing to do with 'purity.' It has to do with your insatiable lust for power and gold!"

Without changing expression, Malcolm backhanded Anri. She fell back into the guard's arms, stunned. She touched her mouth and her hand came away wet with blood.

"You refuse to learn," Malcolm said in mock pity. "Just like your idiot brother. I really should try to teach you some manners so you can better represent proper Gusteko etiquette. But why bother to educate the dead?" He mocked.

Anri jumped toward him, her fingers extended claw-like at his throat but the guard held Anri back without difficulty. Malcolm just smirked and walked away.

He made it a few paces before a soft sound brought him to a halt. It sounded like stones being sifted.

Malcolm looked back at the dry, rocky soil where pebbles were being pushed aside by a small green shoot that pushed up from the earth.

A plant was growing in the bare soil but it was doing in seconds the work of years.

The green shoot pushed up and started to break into multiple branches. The skin of the plant turned brown, hard, and coarsely textured. In a matter of moments there was a young tree proudly standing in the middle of the dry, sandy ground. Grass and ferns grow thickly around its roots but the ground just a foot away was bare, rocky, and bone-dry.

Malcolm stared at the spectacle in shock.

The soldiers all murmured in fear.

Malcolm snatched the bottle from Anri. "What is this?!" He demanded in a roar.

Anri was gaping as hard as anyone else. "I... I don't know. I was... just told it was medicine..."

"Taiyang's witchcraft," Malcolm growled.

"Who is Taiyang?!" Anri asked in exasperation.

Malcolm ignored her and handed the empty vial to one of his guards. "Bring that to the best alchemists in Sanshi when we get back and have them analyze whatever is left. I want to know what it is, what it does, and where it came from!"

The soldier nodded.

You shook it out, Griest Anri thought with disdain. *You have nothing left in the bottle to analyze. You're so busy trying to act decisive that you don't realize that you're acting like an idiot.*

Malcolm glared at Anri for a long moment and then walked away.

The guard restraining Anri finally released her and stepped away, looking nervous. Anri took a deep breath and climbed back into the carriage.

Emilia lay there under a thin blanket, unconscious. She whimpered in her sleep. Anri gently lifted the blanket to inspect her. The marks along her legs were starting to bleed again.

Anri bowed her head in despair.

Subaru arrived back in Stoneybrooke late that afternoon. The aroma of smoke hung heavy in the air.

Subaru turned to Meili and Elsa who looked at him sympathetically. Subaru had been sullen and moody all night.

"You guys wait here," He said quietly. "I need to check a few things out and discuss next steps with someone. Then I'll let you know how we're going to do this."

Elsa and Meili nodded. They dismounted and waited in the woods not far from the house, surrounded by mabeasts.

He dismounted Patrasche and led her by the reins slowly back to the house, his thoughts grim.

Subaru sighed. *Alright. So, there's no point hanging out here any longer. We have plenty of Vitae saved up. We'll head to Siro's and then we can regroup and wait for Koi to find any other information about the spirits and Roswaal. The only question is does it make sense to leave tomorrow morning or should we just leave right now? We're all tired. How long will-*

Subaru stopped talking to himself and his heart stopped as he finally noticed the burned out husk of the house.

"Oh my god!" He screamed.

"And who do we have here?" A clear voice rang out.

Subaru spun around. Standing in the shadows of the nearby trees was a man with long blond hair as well as a large crowd of soldiers and a few men in black robes.

"Do you think that this is the witch?" Gilbert said idly to the people who stood beside him, a man in heavy armor with blond hair and a delicate woman in a flowing robe and two short swords belted at her side.

Subaru clenched his teeth until he feared that his jaw would snap. "Where's Emilia?!" He roared.

"Emilia?" Gilbert raised an eyebrow. "Don't you mean Kairei?"

"Answer the question," Subaru whispered between clenched teeth.

Gilbert looked confused for a moment and then his face twisted in revulsion. "Are you seriously concerned about that elf?! That is... truly disgusting! Lagunican association with demi-human is simply mind boggling. Do you really fuck animals as well?!"

Subaru took a deep breath. "Buddy. You have exactly five seconds to tell me where Emilia is. After that, I won't be responsible for what happens to you."

Gilbert's face twisted in rage. "You fantastic fool. Do you think I'm inexperienced at fighting men with strange powers?! I am more than prepared to deal with you! I have two more Acolyte Knights with me to ensure that we rip your gruesome body to pieces and feed it to the crows!"

The armored man looked at Gilbert with disgust. "Enough of this!" He shouted. "We're here to clean up a potential threat to the realm, Gilbert, not to indulge in your 'racial purity' bullshit!"

Gilbert's eyes glittered dangerously. "You had best watch your tongue, Duncan," He warned.

"Or you'll do what exactly?" He said just as quietly.

"Both of you, stop it!" Deann said. "Fight the enemy first. Then you can fight each other!"

"Sound advice, I must say," Gilbert said, turning his attention back to Subaru. "Time to die, freak of nature."

Gilbert made a gesture.

The priests behind him bowed their heads and began to chant. A veritable swarm of spirits began to whirl around them, bright as stars.

Thin purple chains appeared out of nowhere and quickly bound Subaru's arms and legs. Subaru didn't struggle. He just looked at Gilbert with flames in his eyes.

"Seal Evil," Gilbert said carelessly. "The ultimate power of the spirit arts. So long as my priests continue to commune with their spirits, all magic within the area is rendered

void. Every person within is trapped by mystic chains to be dealt with as I see fit. It even disables the filthy Authority of a witch."

Subaru took a deep breath and all of his pent-up rage exploded. "*Endless Hunger*," He whispered, draping himself in shadow and bringing a frigid chill to the clearing.

The chains shattered into pieces and the knights and priests all screamed in pain, falling to their knees.

The shattered chains hovered in mid air for an eternal moment and then they flew toward Subaru vanishing into his shadow as if falling into a black hole.

The priests' spell to attempt to bind Subaru was still active and they found they couldn't cancel it. Instead, the chains now bound them, like a group of straws that was slowly sucking their power dry.

The dozens of glowing spirits flowing around the knights and the priests... unraveled like balls of yarn. There was a high pitched metallic scream and the spirits were all stretched into long spindly threads that were inexorably drawn into the abyss of Subaru's shadow.

Gilbert, Duncan, and Deann screamed. Their connection to their spirits had been severed. Worse, the three Acolyte Knights were almost in shock from the experience, their last senses from their cherished spirit companions had been a blizzard of images of unimaginable pain and horror. As if they had been sucked into the gullet of a hungry blender and there torn into pieces.

The cold surged and the surrounding trees were instantly covered over with ice.

The priests screamed, transfixed and held in place as the mana was pulled both out of them until finally there was nothing left of the priests but living mummies that crumbled into dust and were drawn by an oppressive force into Subaru's shadow.

"What... What just happened?!" Gilbert shouted, climbing back to his feet. His face twisted in shock.

"I don't know!" Deann said. "He somehow... ate our spirits! My mana is drained! My magic is sealed!"

"Attack!" Gilbert shouted at his soldiers. Most were smart enough to hang back until they could properly assess the situation but three men, braver or dumber than their fellows, charged toward Subaru with their long spears extended.

Before they could close the distance, Elsa was there in a blur. Her knives blazed around them too fast to see as she sank her curved blades into the chinks in their armor and opened their bodies.

The men fell to the ground screaming, blood pouring out of their armor.

Deann watched in horror and quickly stepped forward to confront Elsa who engaged her with a friendly smile. Deann was by far Elsa's superior both in blade work and certainly in magic. But with her spirits having been torn away from her, Deann struggled. Her magic was gone. Without access to her spirits or even her mana, Deann's body felt heavy and unfamiliar, her strength and speed both muted. She felt as if she she had been taken apart and put back together inside out.

Elsa kept throwing herself at Deann, a look of frenzied joy on her face as Deann struggled to push her away.

Duncan clapped down his visor and charged toward the darkened shadow that was Subaru Natsuki and the strange little girl cowering behind him.

Subaru met Duncan's gaze with nothing but boredom.

Duncan swung his huge mace down in a hard arc to crash it into Subaru's neck. This blow should knock his head clean off if not pulverize it like a dropped melon.

Subaru triggered *Indomitable*.

The mace crashed into Subaru's cheek and stopped. The painful vibrations of the impact traveled up Duncan's arm in a violent shiver and it forced him to drop the mace.

Subaru gave Duncan a small shove and Duncan flew backwards into the massed soldiers, bowling them over. He landed on his side some distance away and slowly skidded to a halt.

Duncan shook his head. By sheer luck, he was not knocked flat on his back and he could still stand up. As Duncan fought painfully to regain his feet he heard a growl nearby.

When he did finally stand, Duncan saw with horror that an immense horde of mabeasts had appeared. Several Guiltylowe were snapping the heads off of soldiers with a single bite. Packs of wolgarm were chasing down any who tried to flee, leaping atop their bodies and tearing into them, eating the men alive.

Duncan saw that what had growled at him was a massive Guiltylowe which now leaped atop of the knight, driving him to the ground. Duncan tried to push the Guiltylowe off but he'd lost his mace and more Guiltylowe joined the fight, gnawing at his armor and searching for chinks.

"Keep the knights alive," Subaru said coldly to Meili as her mabeasts ripped the soldiers apart.

Meili nodded.

Subaru heard a shrill scream.

"Big Sis!" Meili screeched.

Subaru looked and saw that Deann had buried her twin blades deep in Elsa's guts. The swords-woman jerked her swords back and Elsa's body fell open in a great glut of blood.

"No!" Meili screamed in despair, rushing over to Elsa's side.

Subaru frowned at Elsa's broken body. He glanced at Meili's broken horned Guiltylowe. "That one," He said as he pointed toward Gilbert who was running for dear life out of the battle.

Gilbert had been spared thus far purely so that Subaru could question him and Subaru had no intention of letting him get away.

The Guiltylowe thundered after the fleeing knight.

Deann ignored the mortally wounded killer and the little girl. She rushed to help Duncan who was on his back and struggling with four Guiltylowe but Subaru stepped in her path.

Deann gave a hiss of pure hatred and swung both swords at his neck.

They didn't even break his skin.

Deann gasped and Subaru grabbed her by the neck, lifting her over his head.

Deann fought to breathe and she spastically dropped her swords as she clawed at his hand. It felt like ice.

Deann looked down into a faceless void and she felt herself draining. Every passing moment there seemed to be less of her. Her muscles weakened, her thoughts felt slower and less precise.

Deann squeaked, wanting to beg for it to stop but uncertain what to even ask the shadowy monster to stop doing.

Just when Deann felt like she would break apart and be scattered to the wind like dandelion spores, the monster dropped her.

Deann hit the ground hard but she was alive. She could barely twitch a finger.

She stared helplessly as a pride of Guiltylowe gathered around Duncan, growling at his helpless body. Deann knew that once on his back in his enormously heavy armor, Duncan had no chance of regaining his feet.

As her eyes shut out of sheer exhaustion, Deann saw Gilbert being dragged back over to her, one of his legs caught in a Guiltylowe's jaws.

Subaru dissipated his shadow. He walked over to where Meili knelt crying beside the prostrate Elsa.

The woman had an enormous wound in the middle of her belly and the blood was dark. Her body had been nearly cut in half. Meili had gathered Elsa's head into her lap.

"It's alright, Meili," The killer's face was serene as she comforted Meili.

Subaru knelt down beside the crying girl and put his arm around her shoulders.

Elsa's breathing was shallow. She chuckled ruefully. "Well. You said you wanted to watch me die."

Subaru made an expression of disgust. "Yeah. Thanks for seeing to my wishes with such dispatch," Subaru muttered sarcastically.

Elsa smiled at him. "For what it's worth, I really did enjoy our time together."

Subaru closed his eyes and sighed. "That's not going to fly, Elsa," He grumbled.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're not getting out of this that easy," Subaru said. He reached into his robe and pulled out a blue vial the size of a thermos.

"What are you-" Elsa began.

Subaru dumped the glowing blue liquid on the ruins of Elsa's abdomen.

Elsa squealed as the liquid hit her with a sensation like bubbly, icy water. Her torso glowed cerulean.

A moment later the glow faded and Elsa saw that her wound was just... gone. Her pale, white skin was clear and unmarked.

Elsa stared at her stomach in amazement.

Meili virtually tackled her Big Sis, squeezing her tight and crying out in relief.

Elsa saw with wonder that all of the curse-doll scars on her body had faded as well. Normally most sensations were fairly muted to Elsa after the grueling damage that Capella had done to her soul but now the rough ground under her body, the warmth of Meili's skin against hers, and even the coolness of the air struck Elsa full-force.

She couldn't even remember the last time that she had felt this alive.

Elsa looked up at Subaru in disbelief.

He gave her a grumpy look as he stood up. "You just cost me ten *years*, Elsa," He grumbled. "Expect to be working for me for a *very* long time before you pay me back."

Elsa felt a tear sliding down her face. "Thank you, Master Subaru," She whispered. "Thank you... Thank you so much..."

Subaru flushed and then shook his head. "Forget it," He grumbled. "I-" Subaru was thrown off step as he felt something collide with him.

Meili had thrown herself at Subaru. She'd wrapped herself around his leg, weeping in gratitude and thanking him incoherently.

Subaru awkwardly patted Meili's head. "Yeah. It's fine, Meili. Really. Now if you two wouldn't mind focusing, I *really* need to find Emilia."

Meili looked up at him in confusion. "Wait. Who's Emilia?"

Duncan was still struggling to move but without any luck. The pack of Guiltylowe who were guarding him just looked bored.

Duncan started as a figure as black as pitch loomed over him.

"Where is Emilia?" The figure intoned.

Duncan took a deep breath. "I have nothing to say to you!"

The figure cocked his head. "Your companion is too tired to speak right now. So questioning her would be a waste of time," He said to himself.

"That's right!" Duncan shouted, anxious for the monster to leave Deann alone.

"Elsa," The figure turned to the beautiful woman at his side. "That girl opened your guts. Would you like the chance to open hers?"

The woman squealed in glee like a schoolgirl.

"Wait! You can't do that!" Duncan protested.

The shadow looked down at Duncan. "Tell me what happened to Emilia or your friend will die just as slowly as I can manage it," He said in the voice of doom.

Duncan felt a shiver run up his spine. "The princess was taken to Sanshi," He said quickly.

"What about Emilia?"

"Who?" Duncan asked.

The shadow drew in a sharp breath that sounded like a winter wind. "The *eff*."

"Oh. She was taken too," Duncan said.

"You're sure?" The shadow demanded.

He nodded. "I saw her get dragged into the carriage this morning."

"Master," Elsa whimpered in disappointment. "Does this mean I don't get to slice up the girl?"

"No!" Duncan shouted. He fought to rise off the ground and failed again. "Listen to me. Deann is a princess! She's Malcolm an Griest's daughter! He won't dare hurt *your* princess as long as you have his!"

The shadow hesitated. He turned the woman whose face reflected deep disappointment. "Tie them both up tight. Quickly. I want to check the house for supplies and then we gotta go. I'll find you another toy later, Elsa."

Elsa sighed but hurried to obey.

Emilia and Anri arrived in Sanshi as the sun set. The pair were transported in a small enclosed carriage that was well guarded by soldiers.

Emilia had been unconscious for most of the trip and she had only just woken up.

Emilia's eyes were fuzzy and she seemed only vaguely aware of where she was. "I'm sure that Subaru will rescue us!" She murmured to Anri.

Anri looked at Emilia with dead eyes and simply shook her head. Her expression utterly hopeless.

The carriage rolled to a stop.

"Well. I guess we're here," Anri muttered with grim humor.

The soldiers opened the carriage to force their captives out but Anri waived them away. She half carried Emilia out of the carriage and let her sit down on the ground.

Malcolm came swaggering over. "Welcome to your new home, Princess-" Malcolm's face twisted in disgust as he actually saw Emilia for the first time. "*What* is that?!" He demanded in outrage.

"One of my handmaidens," Anri said quickly. "She has nothing to do with politics and she's a cripple besides. Let her go. She's no threat to you."

Griest snorted. "A filthy elf. How can I let someone *go* who can't even walk? And I certainly won't allow a demi-human to stay in my city, much less a cripple who can't work!"

Anri's eyes widened in horror. "Malcolm!" She whispered.

"Deal with her!" Griest gestured, walking away.

"Malcolm! You can't!" Anri screamed as the soldiers dragged her away.

Emilia wasn't sure what was going on as the soldiers sprang into action around her. One dragged Emilia over to a large flat stone on the ground and several others forced her chin down on it and held her there.

A hulking soldier walked toward her carrying an enormous axe.

Subaru had quickly gathered the little *Umbra* that had survived the fire. Unfortunately, the sal-ammoniac was heat-sensitive and none of it could be salvaged from the burned out husk of a building.

I only have the four days of Vitae left that I packed in my robe before I left. I hope Anri managed to salvage some...

By the time he had emerged from the burned-out ruin with a bag of black crystals, Elsa and Meili had pried Duncan out of his armor. Deann seemed barely conscious and Duncan wasn't stupid enough to fight back with Deann to protect and surrounded by

mabeasts. Elsa had disarmed them and blindfolded them and tied each of them to the back of a Guiltylowe with stout rope.

Both Guiltylowe seemed to feel extremely put upon due to the knights tied to their backs.

"Are they secure?" Subaru asked. He whistled for Patrasche who came running.

Elsa snapped Subaru something that might have been a salute. "They're not going anywhere!"

Subaru nodded. "Come on. Let's go!" He mounted the earth dragon.

"Stop it!" Anri screamed. "Please!"

The soldier stared down at Emilia, grim as death and he raised the massive axe high over his head.

Emilia trembled, too frightened to scream.

"Stop!" Malcolm shouted, running back into the courtyard.

The axe-wielding soldier barely arrested the downward swing. The soldiers all looked at Malcolm in confusion.

Malcolm's face was pale and he was panting hard. Apparently he had run back here in a panic.

One of the soldiers slowly stood up from where he had been holding Emilia's face to the stone. "Um. What do you want us to do with her, sir?"

Malcolm slowly caught his breath. He thought about it for a long time, his face twisted in disgust and confusion. "Put her with the princess. Make certain that *nothing* happens to *either* of them, you understand?!"

The soldiers looked at one another in confusion. "Yes, sir," The soldier replied.

Malcolm staggered off.

The soldiers moved away from Emilia.

Anri and Emilia stared at each other in shock for a long moment and then Anri flung herself into Emilia's arms and they both sat there crying.

"Hey!" The soldiers pulled them apart. "Get up! Move!"

"She can't get up, you simpleton!" Anri yelled back as the soldiers pulled her to her feet.

The soldiers looked momentarily nonplussed. Then one shrugged. "Eh, just take her."

The largest soldier grabbed Emilia by the arm and proceeded to drag Emilia's body across the courtyard flagstones to the palace.

Anri scowled at him. "Perhaps when Prince Malcolm said 'don't let anything happen to her,'" Anri said in a tight voice. "That included, don't try to drag her down the blasted street like a sack of flour!"

The soldier grumbled but he put his arms under both of Emilia's and picked her up. Now only her bare feet scrapped the ground, scraping and bruising on the hard stone. The soldier's nose twitched as if he was smelling something foul.

The soldiers shoved Anri and forced her to march with them into the palace.

Anri and Emilia shared a helpless look.

Malcolm an Griest sat in his study fuming.

What happened?! An hour ago victory was mine! Now I don't know what is going on!

Malcolm took out the small black book given to him by his 'benefactor' from the Assassin's Guild. He read the lines again.

'The renegade will lead you to your quarry but the death of the Frost Queen ends your line.'

Malcolm growled. *It seemed straightforward enough. I listened to that wretched thug Zeno and he led me right to the Princess. I don't know why it's calling her the 'Frost Queen' now but the book uses odd nomenclature sometimes. I assumed it was just because Kairei was giving herself delusions of grandeur. The warning was unnecessary anyway. I won't do anything to her until after Siros is mine or rubble.*

But after I walked away from the impending execution, I felt the Gospel throbbing in my pocket. I pulled it out and found a new message:

'The Axe that cuts the Frost Queen's throat also cuts the throat of your heir.'

Then I raced back to stop the execution. I was barely in time. The Gospel was pulsating in my pocket the entire time as if to warn me how badly I nearly messed up.

What in the world can this mean? Why is this elf called 'the Frost Queen?' There's no demi-human nobility anywhere in Gusteko! The only thing she could be Queen of is some barren part of earth in the northern wastes. And if I discovered any land in Gusteko that allowed demi-humans to rule, I'd burn it to ash just to prevent those uppity demi-humans from getting any ideas.

Malcolm thought about it.

For right now, I just need to keep the demi-human safe until the war is over. I can always fumigate the guest apartment once she's gone. I considered dumping her in the dungeon but that seems like begging for something to happen to her there too. Somehow our fates are tied together...

The Gospel will give me new instructions eventually. Until then, I should just proceed with my plan: Tell Siros that I have their Princess and invite their surrender.

Hopefully, Deann will return soon. I could use her counsel before I send that message to Siros.

That night, Subaru hid in the forest just outside Sanshi with an army of mabeasts. Elsa and Meili waited close by. Duncan and Deann were lashed on top of the Guiltylowe and they had been gagged to prevent them from calling out for help.

Subaru had a sick feeling in his stomach but the rage held it back. Sanshi was a real city. A huge metropolis with a stout wall encircling it.

This won't work you know, A cold voice whispered to him.

"Shut up," Subaru hissed, barely aware that he had spoken out loud.

"Master Subaru," Elsa commented gently. "I don't think... this is going to work."

Subaru took a deep breath and turned his head to look at Elsa. His expression was blank but the force of his gaze was still oppressive.

Elsa actually blanched.

Subaru paused and seemed to count to ten. "Excuse me?" He asked quietly.

Elsa took a deep breath and spoke kindly. "Mabeasts are no good at attacking a walled city! We'd never get them inside the city and even if we did, the numbers are stacked against us."

Subaru stared at her. "Do you expect me to just *leave* them in there?!" Subaru whispered.

"Honestly, I still don't know who 'they' are but that's a separate problem," Elsa continued calmly. "You need a distraction while you get them away from their captors. If we just attack, everyone will know what we've come here for. And if they can force you to surrender by putting a dagger to the hostages' throats, then we can save ourselves a lot of time and effort by just surrendering now."

Subaru stared at the city for a long moment. He took several deep breaths and then threw his head back with a roar of frustration that echoed through the forest.

The mabeasts all shuddered as did Duncan and Deann.

Meili suddenly felt a surge of pity. "We'll get them back, Subaru," Meili promised. "Whoever they are."

"I'll get her back," Subaru agreed, sounding like a rumbling volcano. "I'll get her back if I have to *burn* Gusteko to the ground!"

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 8**

The next morning, when the gates to Sanshi had been opened, Elsa walked calmly into the city.

It had been a long night. Meili and Elsa hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, being so busy babysitting Subaru. They needed to prevent him from trying to storm the city singlehandedly and also from taking out his fury on Duncan and Deann who were their only bargaining chips.

Slowly, Meili and Elsa had pieced together Subaru's relationship with Emilia. After everything the trio had been through together in the past week, Elsa and Meili were determined to save Subaru's wife. The pair had come to bond in a powerful way to Subaru. Meili was a pack animal and bonding to others was nothing strange to her but this was particularly unfamiliar to Elsa who had long ago learned that attachments were dangerous things in her line of work. She had taken Meili under her wing but that was different than her connection to Subaru. Elsa wasn't sure if she had ever bonded to someone so quickly or strongly in her entire life as she had to Subaru.

There's something strange about him. His appeal feels almost... magical, Elsa mused. *Maybe he really did put a spell on us...*

Elsa walked up to the palace gates.

"Halt!" The guards said, raising their spears. "Who goes there?"

Elsa took stock of the soldiers. These weren't rank and file troops, they were elite guards. If Elsa had to fight her way through them, she'd be in trouble and there was no way that she'd get into the palace without an alarm being sounded in any case.

Elsa being Elsa, she immediately grieved for the lost opportunity for battle and violence that a fight with these troops could provide. But she kept following the plan.

"I'm Elsa," She said to the chief guard.

"What's your business here?" He asked gruffly.

"This is a hostage situation," Elsa said pleasantly.

The guard captain blinked. "Excuse me?"

Elsa handed the guard a signet ring. "Show this to Malcolm an Griest and ask him if he would like to discuss it."

The captain looked at the ring and his face went pale. He gestured at Elsa and whispered something to the other guards before turning and running into the palace.

The other guards surrounded Elsa with snarling faces.

Elsa could easily guess what the guards had said: "Don't let her get away."

Elsa didn't mind. She had no intention of trying to escape.

"It's been nearly two days!" Anri fumed at the guard the next morning.

The guard had just brought breakfast to the room that Anri shared with Emilia.

The guard sneered at her. "Oh. Are your accommodations not up to your liking, Princess?" He asked with vast insincerity.

"The accommodations are fine," Anri said through clenched teeth. "Except for the lock on the door... But my friend needs medicine!"

The guard snorted. "I'd waste good medicine on a pig before I gave it to an elf. Besides, I hear that the prince said he wants you to watch her die so you know what a failure you are. Enjoy the show!"

"The prince ordered you to keep her alive!" Anri shouted. "How are you going to do that if she doesn't have her medicine?!"

The guard looked momentarily uncertain. He stepped out of the room and closed the door.

Anri sighed and walked to the bed where Emilia lay sleeping, curled up and silent. At least the room was open and well-ventilated. Emilia slept in a bright sunbeam that would help keep her warm.

Well. Maybe that will accomplish something. I don't know what Subaru was giving Mili or what medicine to ask for... But maybe Malcolm will care enough about keeping Emilia alive to send for a healer.

I don't know why Malcolm suddenly decided to keep her alive but I'm not complaining.

Maybe at least Emilia will survive this. I doubt that I will.

Anri sat down on the bed beside Emilia and buried her face in her hands.

"Anri?" Emilia rasped, with her eyes still shut.

Anri jumped and bent over Emilia. "Mili!" She whispered. "Are you OK?"

Mili took a ragged breath and slowly opened her eyes. They were foggy. "...Everything hurts," She croaked.

Anri bit her lip. She gently lifted the covers and found that the black marks had crept up Emilia's body all the way to her chest. They were all bleeding and leaking black puss.

Anri helped Emilia slowly sit up.

Emili sighed. "Anri, can you please turn on the lamp? I don't think I'm going to get any more sleep tonight."

"The *lamp*?" Anri said sharply. She looked at the bright sunlight filling the room through the windows and the balcony door. "Mili... it's morning."

"Then why is it so dark?"

"It's not dark, Mili. The room is very well lit."

"I can't see it," Emili moaned. She struggled to lift her hand but she managed waved it back and forth before her face a few times. "Nothing. Anri, I... I think I'm blind..." She whispered.

Elsa was in foul humor. The guards had searched her and taken her knives away before letting her into the castle. Elsa had been very direct in telling them that they had better take good care of those daggers. They had a lot of sentimental value.

Elsa had already considered keeping Deann's twin slashing swords after the exchange but she intended to keep her own daggers as well. Every job had the perfect tool.

Elsa marched in the center of a formation of eight guards who led her through the castle. They looked at Elsa as though she might turn into a dragon at any moment.

Elsa walked very calmly through the castle, inspecting the decor and the tapestries until she arrived in a small conference room. Seated at that conference table was a bear of a man with a short black beard whose eyes burned like hot coals. His muscles

bulked as if he could barely keep himself from leaping at Elsa and strangling her with his bare hands.

"Hello," Elsa said in a friendly voice.

Malcolm pointed imperiously to a seat across from him and Elsa sat down agreeably. Someone had laid out a plate of cookies and Elsa wasted no time in grabbing one.

Malcolm took a deep breath. "Where did you find this?" He whispered, holding up the ring.

"I took it off your daughter's finger," Elsa said politely as she popped the cookie in her mouth.

Malcolm gaped in astonishment at this admission. He leaped to his feet and raced around the table. Elsa just looked at him curiously.

He grabbed the unresisting Elsa by the throat and slammed her hard against the stone walls. Malcolm got into Elsa's face and hissed. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just gut you where you stand!"

Elsa finished chewing her cookie. "Because my *Master*," She said with considerable pride. "Swore that if I wasn't back by lunchtime, he'd cut off all your daughter's fingers. My little sister wanted to make them into a necklace," Elsa added. "But the Master said that would be gross and he'd buy her something prettier to wear instead."

Malcolm let go of Elsa and took a step back, heaving like a bellows. "What do you want?"

Elsa shrugged. "You stole a Princess that my Master is invested in as well as her companion. We have *your* princess and her companion. We'll make it a straight swap."

Malcolm's hands made fists. His entire body trembled until he finally relaxed his fists by sheer force of will. "Is she *alright*?" Malcolm grated.

"Oh yes," Elsa replied. "She's in perfect health. Honestly, I wanted to rip out her entrails but the Master said no."

"Who is this 'Master' of yours?!" Malcolm demanded.

"Taiyang," Elsa replied, beaming. "The Witch of the Frozen Wastes."

Malcolm's jaw fell open. *What? This 'Taiyang' was able to overpower Deann, Duncan, and Gilbert?! And he was even able to take them prisoner?! What is this monster?!*

I'm a fool. I should have sent Kairei ahead and stayed with Deann to overpower the fiend but I believed Zeno's sugar story about Taiyang exaggerating his power. I thought that Gilbert, Deann, and Duncan would easily match some upstart mage with the temerity to compare himself to the ancient witches.

Zeno must have tricked me into becoming Taiyang's primary target so that the witch would forget about him! He might have even warned Taiyang about our attack to ingratiate himself to the Witch.

Zeno will pay for this.

But that's later.

"Are *your* captives alright?" Elsa emphasized. "My Master wants you to know that he'll personally cut out a pound of flesh from our captives to match whatever damage you've done."

Malcolm was startled back into the moment. "Kairei is fine!" Malcolm snapped, wishing more than anything he could simply snap this obnoxious cunt's slender neck.

Elsa bit her lip and hesitated. She wanted to press for more information about this 'Emilia' whom she knew was Subaru's real focal point but she didn't dare. There was no way that Malcolm wouldn't realize that Taiyang was invested in her if Elsa asked about her.

Malcolm trembled with rage. "Sunset," He whispered. "The clearing at the top of Badon Hill."

Elsa nodded. "We'll be there."

Elsa grabbed another cookie and then turned and walked out of the conference room as calm as could be. She paused in front of the guard captain and held out her hand. "I'll take my daggers back, if you please," She said firmly.

The guard captain snarled at her but Elsa looked completely unconcerned. "You'll get them back when you're outside the gates!" The captain snarled. "Not before!"

For the first time in the entire meeting, Elsa looked annoyed but she shrugged and followed the guards as they led her away.

Malcolm sat down heavily at the table, grinding his teeth. In his hands, he tenderly held the signet ring that his daughter had worn. The same signet that had once been worn by her mother and Malcolm's mother before her.

Late that afternoon, the fuming Malcolm and Griest sat in a wagon that was overflowing with his best guards. They were pressed together like arrows in a quiver. Anri lay on the floor, bound and gagged. Emilia was similarly restrained but she had been unconscious for hours now and her breathing was erratic. Nobody seemed to care too much that the girls were lying out on the hard wagon floor.

Malcolm took a deep breath. "Alright. Our priority is to get Deann back at any cost."

"Yes, sir," The guard captain nodded, noticing that Duncan hadn't been mentioned at all. "What do we do after that?"

"I want you to kill or capture every man there," Malcolm said intently. "This 'Taiyang' has crossed the unthinkable line: You do not go after children. Deann is practically still a girl. She was eighteen just a few years ago! She's too young to be a pawn of politics."

Anri scowled and snarled something into her gag but Malcolm ignored her.

"Kill or capture. Understood, sir," The captain nodded.

Malcolm breathed out through clenched teeth. "I'm going to *skin* everyone involved in this farce. I'm going to flay them and then hang their skin from the walls of Sanshi as a warning to the next *ten* generations that you do not dare to attack my family..."

Subaru, Meili, and Elsa waited in the clearing at the top of a massive hill in the forest.

Meili's mabeasts all hid in the woods nearby.

Duncan was tied up tight, unable to so much as twitch. He was blindfolded and gagged.

Deann was similarly blindfolded and gagged but while her arms and legs were secured, her bonds had been loosened enough for her to stand upright. Elsa was holding the Princess and caressing Deann's throat with the flat of a knife, whispering into her ear about how wonderful she thought her entrails would feel.

Subaru sat on a log, drumming his fingers against his leg. He held a burning candle in his hands. He thought about telling Elsa to knock off terrifying Deann but decided to let

it pass. *Give Elsa a treat*, Subaru thought to himself. *She's been very useful recently. And if Griest double-crosses me, scary words will be the least of Deann's concerns.*

"Subaru," Meili whispered. "They're coming."

Subaru glanced at Meili who stood beside him with her eyes screwed shut. Subaru knew that she was looking through the eyes of her Knickerbockers.

"How many?" Subaru murmured.

"Hard to tell," Meili said after a moment's thought. "There's only one wagon but it looks like it's jammed full of guards and soldiers."

"No surprise," Subaru sighed. He stood up. "Alright, Meili. As soon as we get Anri and Emilia back, I want you to take them and get out of here. Let Elsa, the mabeasts, and me clean up this mess."

Meili nodded solemnly.

"Elsa, put on your mask," Subaru called.

Elsa quickly put her black mask on.

"Should I?" Meili asked.

Subaru shook his head. "Anri never saw you before so she won't freak out when you're here. But Elsa tried to kill them last week. Emilia and Anri will go into hysterics if they see her. Anri and Emilia should listen to you when you guide them to safety." Subaru looked pained for a moment. "Also... don't be *too* surprised if Emilia acts like she knows you."

"How could she know me?"

Subaru sighed and shook his head. "It's... It's way too complicated to get into right now. Just... roll with it, I guess."

Meili nodded, her face resolute. She glanced down the trail. "They're coming," She murmured.

Subaru nodded. "Yup."

"Master," Elsa murmured. "Aren't you going to shroud yourself?"

"I thought about it," Subaru admitted. "I'd rather that nobody knew who Taiyang really was. But I'd also rather lead Griest to underestimate me and that'll be hard to do if I look like a living shadow."

"Here, Subaru. Why don't you take this?" Meili passed her black mask to him.

Subaru frowned. "Why?"

Meili shrugged. "Because like you said, you've worked pretty hard to make sure that nobody knows you're Taiyang. Be a shame to throw away all the effort now."

Subaru mulled it over, then shrugged, and pulled on the mask.

The two stood side by side and waited for the wagon.

The wagon rolled up to the clearing atop the hill and came to a stop. Malcolm was the first man out and then dozens of soldiers poured out of the wagon until nearly thirty men stood in the clearing.

Malcolm stared at the people in the clearing in disbelief. There was a man wearing a ridiculous black mask who was holding a single burning candle in his hand and there was a little girl standing beside him. A woman in a similar mask who was obviously the same woman that Malcolm had spoken to this morning was standing nearby and she had a dagger at Deann's throat. Duncan lay at their feet.

What is this? There were should be more of them. They can't have been stupid enough to come here alone. Are the others waiting in ambush?

"Prince Malcolm," The young man that Malcolm assumed was Taiyang said. "I don't know about you but I have things to do tonight. Let's hurry up and get this over with."

Malcolm blinked in surprise but then nodded, calming down. *It really is just the three of them, isn't it? These people aren't brilliant criminals, they're just fools who got lucky. Possibly Siros partisans but fools all the same. We just need to get Deann back and then we'll rip them apart, piece by piece.*

"Deann! Are you alright?!" Malcolm shouted.

Deann squirmed in Elsa's grip and shouted into her gag.

The woman raised her dagger questioningly and Taiyang gave an abrupt nod.

The woman loosened Deann's gag. "I'm fine, Father. Be careful! The witch is a monster! He-"

The woman quickly re-gagged Deann. "I think I like you better when you're being quiet," The woman reprimanded her.

Malcolm ground his teeth. "Give me back my daughter."

Taiyang cocked his head. "I think you owe us our hostages first," He called back.

Malcolm fumed then nodded at the guards. They pulled Anri out of the wagon, dumping the tied up girl on the dirt hard enough to knock the wind out of her. Anri moaned and struggled to sit up, spitting out her gag.

"Anri, you alright?" He shouted.

Anri coughed. "Yes."

Taiyang waited. "Where's the other one?" He said with an edge in his voice.

Malcolm frowned. He'd honestly forgotten that the elf-girl was even in the wagon. He gestured to the guard who pulled Emilia out of the wagon and dropped her on the ground like a bag of flour. Emilia caught the ground with her face and lay there unmoving.

Malcolm looked at Taiyang with annoyance. "I can't imagine why you'd want a blind and crippled elf!"

Taiyang took a step back. "*Blind?!!*" He whispered in horror.

"Malcolm threw away her medicine!" Anri shouted before the soldiers could silence her. "I begged him not to but he threw it away just to hurt me! She hasn't had a dose in two days!"

Malcolm's head snapped between Anri and Taiyang as he tried to process this.

Taiyang hissed. "Kill them," He whispered. "All of them..."

Malcolm frowned in confusion. The threat made no sense. The trio were were outnumbered at *least* ten to one.

Malcolm was still mulling this over when he heard a scream from behind him. A full pack of Guiltylowe had dashed out of the forest and attacked his soldiers from behind. The soldiers tried to stand their ground but the sheer power of the huge mabeasts was bowling them over and knocking them back. A few soldiers broke and ran, recognizing a fight that they couldn't win but a horde of wolgarm streamed through the underbrush, sinking their fangs into the legs of the fleeing soldiers until they felt down, screaming in pain. Then they tore them to bits.

Anri looked around in horror at the rampaging mabeasts but they paid her and Emilia no attention.

A little girl rushed to Anri's side. She quickly drew a knife and began to saw through Anri's bindings. Anri looked up at the strange girl in confusion, wondering who she was but this was no time to discuss it.

"Follow me!" Meili shouted, racing into the trees. There was no time to untie Emilia and there would be no point in untying an unconscious woman who couldn't walk anyway. Anri picked up the limp elf and bolted after Meili.

Malcolm swore and drew his sword. He turned back to Deann, seeking to grab his daughter and escape this ambush but something crashed into him.

Malcolm went rolling but he was a seasoned warrior and came quickly to his feet.

Malcolm's jaw dropped. Standing before him was a terrible, living shadow that seemed to suck the light and heat out of the day.

The witch grabbed Malcolm by the throat in a grip he couldn't break. Malcolm reflexively dropped his sword to claw futilely at Taiyang's hands. Malcolm felt himself lifted to face the witch although his face was nothing but depth-less shadow. "What did you do to my wife?!" He hissed.

"Your wife?" Malcolm whispered without air. He'd never known that the Princess had a consort. Then again, that would explain why this witch had been willing to come rescue her. A witch consorting with a cursed House of degenerates? Not a huge surprise.

Malcolm gasped for breath as he felt himself... dissolving. The witch was stealing something from him. Something precious. With each passing moment, Malcolm felt weaker, more empty. He felt like he was seconds away from crumbling into powder.

Then he fell to the ground.

Malcolm fought to catch his breath. The world swam around him as he looked up and saw the masked woman frantically tugging on the witch's arm.

"Master!" The woman scream. "We're about to be overwhelmed! We need to run!"

Malcolm dimly heard shouts and cries. *The reinforcements I ordered to follow us just in case. Good timing.*

Malcolm panted for breath but he smiled through his gasps. Taiyang and the women turned to run but the soldiers were in close pursuit.

The soldiers looked poised to catch the witch until he dropped the candle. The ground underneath them erupted in brilliant purple flames. The soldiers leaped backward, screaming. A few of the soldiers' uniforms had caught fire and their comrades desperately beat it out.

The clearing was now ringed in unnatural fire.

"The witch cursed us," A soldier said in horror.

Malcolm fought his way back to his feet. He looked around the clearing but even the mabeasts were gone. There was nothing left but the wagon and torn-up bodies.

Not far away, Malcolm saw Deann sitting on the ground, fighting to keep her balance as she worked to break free of her bindings.

Meili and Anri stopped running by a little stream, a short distance down the mountain.

"Thank you," Anri panted, laying Emilia down on the ground.

The girl waved dismissively. She was doubled-over, trying to catch her breath.

Anri finally stopped panting. "You have my eternal gratitude," She said formally.

The little girl shrugged. "Well. I mean thanks and all but I serve the Master. Your thanks don't mean much to me."

Anri frowned in confusion.

The little girl seemed to be inspecting Emilia with curiosity. "Is this Emilia?"

"Yes. How did you know that?" Anri replied.

She shrugged. "Master Subaru talks about her a lot," She replied.

Wait. Her master is Subaru? Anri wondered. "What's your name?" She asked.

"Meili. Hey, can you help me sit her up? Subaru gave me some medicine for her."

Anri's eyes widened. "Really? Yeah, let's give it to her right now!"

Meili quickly cut Emilia's bonds and Anri helped her sit up and pried her mouth open.

Emilia was completely unresponsive.

Meili reached into a pocket and pulled out a small bottle of glowing blue liquid.

"Be careful," Anri warned. "Give her a tiny amount at a time. We don't want her to choke."

Meili thought for a moment and then nodded. The girl uncorked the bottle and poured it down Emilia's throat, a few drops at a time.

When the vial was empty, Anri let Emilia's mouth close. The unconscious elf made a faint whimper but that was all.

They gently laid Emilia down on the ground.

Anri thought that Emilia's breathing was a tiny bit steadier but it might have just been wishful thinking.

Anri walked away a couple of steps. She glanced at Meili to ensure she wasn't being closely watched but Meili seemed utterly indifferent to her presence. The girl peered into the woods as if looking for someone.

Anri reached into a hidden pocket in her clothes and pulled out a small black book and began to flip through it.

She found the last page and quickly read: *To find the shortest path to the medicine, seek out the fox's den by the burned tree along the river. Find medicine for the Frost Queen or all of Gusteko will burn beneath the Fire Witch's rage.*

Anri swallowed hard as she put the book away.

A few minutes later, Subaru came stumbling down the mountain, surrounded by mabeasts and without his mask.

"Subaru!" Anri shouted. "Are you OK?"

"Forget me! Is *she* OK?!" Subaru yelled back. He looked like he was struggling with a powerful migraine and he kept touching his forehead.

Anri looked nervously at the savage mabeasts gathered all around her. They all looked at Anri with cold, red eyes.

He sat down beside Emilia and gently peeled back one of her eyelids.

Her brilliant violent eyes were as foggy as curdled milk.

"Oh my god," Subaru whispered in a broken voice.

"We need to get her to Siros, Subaru!" Anri said. "We need to find her a healer!"

"Anri! Siros won't be able to help!" Subaru said, clutching his temples. "We need to make more *Vitæ* for Emilia immediately but most of my equipment was burned to a crisp!"

"*Burned?*" Anri said.

Subaru hissed. "They burned the house down after they captured you!"

Anri stared at him in disbelief. "Well... We could find an alchemy lab in Siros!"

Subaru snorted. "How good are the labs in Siros, Anri? Do you have any idea? They've been under siege for months. What do they have for chemical supplies left? Do they have *any* of the ingredients we'd need?!"

"Subaru, what's the plan?" Meili whispered.

Subaru thought for a moment and then took a deep breath. "We'll head toward Kocytos."

"*Kocytos?*!" Anri said.

Subaru looked grim. "I saw a good lab there when I went shopping a few days ago. It should have what I need. And I was told they'd be getting a shipment of sal-ammoniac today or tomorrow but it was too long for me to wait to buy from them."

"Do you think whoever will let you use his lab?" Meili asked.

"I'll buy it from him."

Meili looked dubious. "What if-"

Subaru cut her off. "Then I'll let your Big Sis 'negotiate' for me," Subaru said flatly.

Meili giggled.

Anri frowned. "Look, this doesn't sound like a good idea to me. But no matter where we're going, we need to leave right now. Malcolm an Griest is going to tear this whole forest apart looking for us!"

"She's right, Master," Elsa said, emerging from the forest with the broken pieces of her mask in hand. "They're fanning out in search parties."

Anri turned white. She pointed at Elsa and opened her mouth to scream.

Before she could blink, Elsa was beside her, one hand clamped firmly over Anri's mouth. "Please don't," Elsa said gently. "I did just mention the search parties in the

forest. There are several hundred of them and more are arriving. That's enough to even give the Master some trouble. So screaming would be a very poor idea."

Anri stared at Elsa with huge eyes and then look at Subaru in shocked disbelief.

Subaru made a face. "You probably have a lot of questions but now is not the time to answer them." He whistled for Patrasche.

Patrasche came running up to them followed by a Guiltylowe with a broken horn.

Elsa gave Anri a rueful look. "We need to leave now," Elsa said. "I'll take my hand off your mouth if you promise not to scream."

Anri stared at Elsa, trembling. She slowly nodded.

Elsa took her hand away.

Anri took a deep slow, breath. "Subaru," She whispered. "What the *fuck* is going on?! Why are there... tame mabeasts with you and what are you doing with Elsa?!"

Subaru shook his head. "No time to explain!" He reached down and gently picked up Emilia.

"You told me that Elsa was dead!" Anri hissed, her face livid.

"No," He corrected firmly. Subaru carried Emilia over to Patrasche who knelt down so that he could mount. "I told you that Elsa wasn't looking for you any more. She isn't."

Anri stared up at Elsa in complete shock.

Elsa just her gave a shrug and a friendly grin. "Master Subaru made us a better offer."

"A better *offer*?!" Anri echoed.

"He promised not to kill us if we did what he said," Meili said matter-of-fact.

Subaru climbed on Patrasche. "Meili, Elsa, grab the mabeasts and let's get out of here."

"Right," Meili nodded.

Anri watched in amazement as Meili mounted the Guiltylowe as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Elsa climbed on behind her.

"Are you *coming*?!" Subaru asked impatiently.

Anri realized that Subaru was already sitting on the kneeling Patrasche, Emilia held tightly in his arms.

Anri glared at him. "How can I trust you after all this?"

"Uh, because you've got no choice?" Subaru threw her words back at her. "Look, come with us or stay here and take your chances, Anri. But I'm leaving. Now."

Anri scowled but there was nothing she could say to that. Subaru helped Anri climb up into the saddle. Anri took the reins so that Subaru could focus on holding Emilia.

"Subaru, I have a *whole* lot of questions," Anri muttered to him.

"Ask later!" He snapped.

"I have one really important question you had better answer right now, Subaru: Which way am I going?"

"That way," Subaru pointed.

As the sun set, the strangest procession imaginable thundered across the grassy plains.

Kocytos was a long way from the Sanshi capitol but Patrasche and the mabeasts were eating up the ground as they ran.

Anri's mind was racing a mile a minute but Subaru steadfastly refused to discuss anything right now. He was completely fixated on Emilia whose breathing was still labored.

Anri had told Subaru that she sounded much better than she had before but he had taken this as small comfort.

Anri's eyes had brightened as they raced across the plains. She spotted an ancient tree growing along a small river that had been struck by lightning and burned black.

"Subaru!" Anri shouted. "We need to stop up here!"

"What?! Why?!" Subaru protested.

"This looks like a dead-drop site that I've heard about," Anri lied. "We might get some valuable information or even find some medicine at this stash."

Subaru hesitated at the word 'medicine' as Anri had expected. Anri checked Patrasche and brought the earth dragon to a walk. She saw out of the corner of her eye that Elsa, Meili, and the mabeasts did the same.

Anri brought Patrasche to a halt by the burned out husk of the tree and the earth dragon knelt down for her passengers to dismount.

Anri jumped off and inspected the tree, looking around for animal tracks.

Subaru gently laid Emilia against Patrasche and stood up.

"What are we looking for exactly?" Subaru growled suspiciously.

"Anything useful!" Anri said vaguely, looking around feverishly for any clues.

Subaru snorted and walked up to the burned out husk of a tree, inspecting it.

"Anri," Subaru grated. "When did you hear about this 'dead-drop site?'"

"I don't know," Anri hedged. "Maybe a few months ago? Things have been pretty chaotic lately. I just heard about a massive tree in this area by a river that was struck by lightning. There's nothing else nearby so this had to be it, right?"

Subaru snorted. Anri realized that he was walking up to her with a grim expression.

Anri straightened up but before she could ask a question, Subaru reached out and stroked her cheek.

"Hey!" Anri said, instinctively rubbing her face. Her fingers came away black with soot.

"This tree was struck by lightning *maybe* a few days ago!" Subaru snapped. "The rain hasn't even had time to wash away the ashes yet! So do you maybe want to *amend* your bullshit story?!"

Anri hesitated. Subaru's face was grim. Elsa and Meili were looking at her coldly as well.

There was a shrill scream from the other side of the river.

Anri looked and saw a girl in a hood running from three much larger men.

Subaru saw it too.

He glowered at Anri for a long moment. "You don't go anywhere. Come on, girls," He grumbled to Elsa and Meili.

Subaru charged toward the three men. At the last moment, he decided not to use *Indomitable* yet, wanting the pleasure of using his own muscles.

The men were completely fixated on their prey so when Subaru burst out of the tall grass he took them entirely by surprise. Subaru's fist collided with the first man, a thuggish-looking brute with orange hair and a scar across his lips.

The thug was much bigger and heavier than Subaru but with all the strength of Subaru's as-yet unvented fury and the mana stolen during the fight from Griest and his soldiers, Subaru's punch struck him with staggering force. The man reeled backwards.

The other two men came to a stop. They looked at one another in confusion and then turned to their leader who was wobbling in place with a fuzzy expression. Their quarry, a slender young woman wearing an elaborate robe and a hooded cloak, stopped and partially hid behind a tree.

"Listen," Subaru grated. "I don't know, nor do I care to know, what's going on here but you guys need to find a new hobby."

The orange-haired man got to his feet. "You're either crazy or have a death wish."

"It depends on my mood," Subaru dead-panned. "I'm only going to say this once. Screw off. The lot of you. I have just had two of the most miserable days of my life but if you three want me to take out my frustrations on you, I'm super into-it."

"Do you have any idea who we are?" The orange haired man demanded.

Subaru sighed. "Why does everyone always ask me that question? The answer is always 'no.' And the answer is always 'I don't care.' What were you expecting me to say? You obviously don't know who I am."

"These men are attempting to murder me!" A woman shouted from behind him. "If you can protect me, I'll pay you handsomely!"

Subaru jumped at this voice and spun around. The 'young woman' was staring at him wide-eyed. She pulled down her hood, revealing black hair with red streaks and a pair of similarly colored fox ears.

"Ko... Could you be quiet for a minute, please?" Subaru said awkwardly, barely avoiding calling the kitsune by name. "I'm... kind of in the middle of something."

"I'll give you one chance to get out of this with your skin," The orange-haired man said grimly. "Walk away and forget you ever saw anything..."

Subaru glanced at the man and then seemed to completely dismiss him from mind. He looked at Koi with narrowed eyes. "Who are these men?" He asked her in a near growl.

Koi took a deep breath. "Gatz was one of my servants but he betrayed me. He's fallen under the influence of a rival of mine who seeks to kill my daughter and myself!"

"Zeno is attacking you?" Subaru said sharply. "...What made him do that?" Subaru's voice grew softer and he seemed to be talking to himself. "...What would have made him think that he could get away with that..."

Koi's eyes widened slightly. *Zeno? I never mentioned his name. How did this man know about it?*

Subaru stepped forward. "You guys work for Zeno?" He called.

Gatz scowled. "That's right! You may be a tough little prick but are you really ready to take on the Black Silver Coins? You better stay out of our business!" He snapped.

"What confuses me," Subaru said slowly. "Is what made Zeno do this. Last I heard, Taiyang was protecting Koi. What made Zeno think he could get away with threatening her?"

Wait! He knows my name? And how can this boy know about my arrangement with Taiyang?!

Gatz snorted. "Zeno isn't afraid of Taiyang!"

Subaru gave him a chill smile. "We both know that isn't true."

Gatz snarled. "Fuck this!" Gatz rushed Subaru with a long knife extended and his men followed close behind.

Subaru stood with ground with a faint smirk.

The men all slammed their long knives into Subaru's body. The blades failed to even scratch his skin.

Subaru raised his hands and gently pushed the trio away. The thugs went flying, landing on their backs, and sliding out on the dirty path.

"Yeah, that's a hard pass," Subaru grumbled. "Elsa, I need some information. Bring the leader to me alive. I don't care what you do with the others."

Koi heard a honeyed voice titter from the tall grass. A beautiful woman emerged from cover with a sweet smile on her face. "Master Subaru, you just made my day," She cooed.

Gatz jaw dropped. "That's the fucking Bowel Hunter! Run!" The trio turned and sprinted into the tall grass.

Koi stared at the devastatingly beautiful woman in absolute shock. That is the Bowel Hunter! Wait... Subaru? Subaru Natsuki?! Taiyang's great enemy?! The Bowel Hunter works for Taiyang. What is she doing with Subaru Natsuki and calling him Master?

It doesn't matter. I need to find Senko and protect her from Zeno's vengeance. Subaru Natsuki might be the tool I need to do this. Even if Taiyang murders me for it, I need to make sure that Senko gets out of this mess alive!

Elsa glanced at the fleeing thugs. "May I, Master?" Elsa asked politely.

"Sure. Just don't take all day," Subaru emphasized. "And they might split up so bring Meili and her pets with you. Remember, I need the orange one alive."

"On it!" Elsa said like a song of joy. She sprinted off into the tall grass. A pride of Guiltylowe followed her in close pursuit, one Guiltylowe had a small girl mounted on its back.

Mabeasts? And a little girl riding them?

That's the little girl that was with Taiyang the night that he raided Zeno's manor!

Did Subaru Natsuki manage to steal away Taiyang's minions?!

I saw the look on the Bowel Hunter's face at Zeno's manor. It wasn't an act. Elsa Granhiert's adoration of Taiyang was completely unfeigned. Now she's looking at Subaru Natsuki the same way. What the hell is going on here?!

Koi stood there silently for several minutes while Subaru waited patiently for his minions to retrieve the thugs. As desperate as she was to get answers, Koi knew better

than to tip her hand about her relationship with Taiyang by asking Subaru any questions.

All she could do was stand there and wrack her brain, trying to deduce what was going on.

A bit later, Elsa emerged from the tall grass. Her clothes were blood-splattered but she had a cheerful smile on her face. She was dragging Gatz along the ground by his collar.

Behind her, a small army of mabeasts emerged as well as the little girl riding atop a Guiltylowe who seemed completely casual about the blood on her pets' muzzles. If anything, the little girl looked bored.

Elsa dragged Gatz to Subaru's feet and dropped him there.

Gatz looked up in fear, surrounded by enemies.

Subaru squatted down in front of him. "I have just one question," Subaru whispered. "*What* made Zeno think that it was safe to betray Taiyang?"

Gatz swallowed hard but didn't reply.

"Elsa," Subaru said calmly.

"Yes, Master?" She asked sweetly.

"Make him talk..."

"...And that's all I know, I swear!" Gatz begged. The man had been virtually turned inside out.

Subaru stood in front of him, grinding his teeth and panting for breath in a rage.

"So it was *Zeno* who ratted out Emilia and the princess to Griest!" The little girl on the Guiltylowe said indignantly.

Subaru took a deep breath. "He will *pay* for this," Subaru hissed.

Koi's eyes widened as the warm spring afternoon cooled around her. A chill wind blew up and the day darkened. Subaru's face began to flicker, first growing darker and then lighter again.

This final piece solved the puzzle. It's *Taiyang! Taiyang is Subaru Natsuki!*

I don't understand. Why pretend to be your own worst enemy? ...Unless he...

Her eyes widened. *Of course! It's genius! Subaru Natsuki claimed to be from another world. A strange story by itself. A few persons really do arrive from other worlds every few centuries but most are nothing more than con-artists trying to bury their pasts. Almost nobody who makes that claim gets anyone to believe them since any amount of research invariably turns up evidence that they do have a past somewhere on this world.*

It's honestly amazing that anyone ever tries that lie anymore but it is awfully tempting. It's the perfect tactic to use if you have a back story that you don't want to explain.

Like, for example, if you'd been sleeping in the Elio Forest for centuries...

Taiyang isn't Subaru Natsuki, Subaru Natsuki is Taiyang! The Witch of the Wastes invented his own archenemy and nearly placed him on the throne of Lagunica! That way he could control both sides of the equation!

Taiyang can do the dirty work while Subaru Natsuki rules in the light. Everyone spoke of Subaru Natsuki's remarkable power. But it makes perfect sense that he'd possess unimaginable strength if he were a witch!

By making Subaru Natsuki the only one that Taiyang fears, Subaru Natsuki will be placed at the apex of any effort to defeat him! Taiyang can undermine attacks against himself from the inside and no one will ever suspect anything!

Taiyang doesn't plan to rule the Black Silver Coins. He plans to rule the world! He nearly conquered Lagunica without any effort at all, even if that plan went sideways for a time due to the Witch Cult's attack, and now he's aligned with the outsider House of Siros which would have been desperate to form any alliance to save itself! Sanshi's forces are now in ruins and Siros is ascended but they know they owe their power solely to Taiyang! Once the war ends, Taiyang will be the defacto ruler of Gusteko.

It's amazing. His strategy is the work of pure genius.

Koi reset herself. Focusing on the immediate concern.

I need to assure Taiyang that my loyalty is ironclad. That's the only reason he'd see any reason to help me and to rescue Senko at this point. Moreover, this is a golden opportunity for us. Taiyang will one day rule this world, openly or from the shadows and I can have a seat at the table when the spoils are divided if I play my cards right.

My daughter might one day rule her own realm if we prove our loyalty...

"Master," Elsa murmured. "Do we continue onto Kocytos or do we go looking for Zeno?"

Subaru took a deep breath. "Emilia comes before revenge. We'll got to Kocytos and find a way to make medicine before we deal with Zeno."

"I can show you where Zeno is," Koi broke in.

Subaru started and turned around. He'd clearly forgotten that Koi was even there.

"I can show you where Zeno is, my lord," Koi repeated with a charming smile. "He's not far away."

Subaru thought for a moment. "Elsa, you can finish playing with this guy. But keep him quiet and don't take all day! We need to move."

Elsa seemed to swoon with delight as she knelt over the helpless Gatz who was quietly protesting and begging for mercy.

"Where is he?" Subaru murmured to Koi.

"He's at my my estate," Koi replied.

"And where is that?" Subaru asked carefully.

Koi put an artfully pained expression on her face and lowered her voice. "Forgive me, Master. But I don't think we have time for these kind of games," She whispered. "My daughter and my whole organization are in great danger. I know that you have many minions to work your will but if we don't get there in time to save my division, I worry that your plans will be dealt a serious setback."

Subaru's eyes widened. "What are you saying?" He whispered.

Koi shrugged with a rueful smile. "Forgive me, Master. As your most humble servant, I try to be cognizant only of what you wish and ignorant of what you do not wish for me to know. But I have known who you truly are for some time."

Subaru's face was stony as he looked down at the slender kitsune. "And how many *other* people know about this?" He grated.

Koi's face fell into a very believable expression of shock. "Why, no one at all, Master! I have kept your secret absolutely confidential as any good servant should! I have not even shared this knowledge with my precious daughter."

Subaru frowned and leaned back on his heels, his face thoughtful. "Why would you tell me that?" He asked.

"Because it's the truth, Master."

Subaru shook his head. "You're not stupid. You just gave me the perfect way to tie up a loose end if I decided that you know more than I want you to know."

"Naturally, Master," Koi said with feigned nonchalance although her heart was pounding. "I hope you didn't misunderstand my pledge. While oaths among the Black Silver Coins are often rumored to be... negotiable, a rumor with some accuracy I regret to admit, among my family, oaths of honor and loyalty are considered to be absolute. Senko and I have sworn to you our eternal loyalty and that is all that there is to be said on the matter. If you truly believe that my death would service you better than my life, you, of course, know best. But my actions are only motivated by my reverence for my Master and my devotion to his will. I have and will continue to work tirelessly to see to your ascension. Senko and I are your most faithful servants and in permitting the death of either of us, you would sadly weaken yourself. And as a loyal servant, I would have to object to that," She admitted in dolorous tones.

Subaru looked at her in annoyance. "Koi, you are a shrewd and dangerous woman."

Koi simpered. "Thank you, Master," She fell into a low bow.

"That wasn't a compliment," He grumbled.

Koi took a deep breath and her voice grew serious. "Master. I have been your faithful vassal. I have followed your every instruction without question and without complaint. But now, I fear my entire organization, especially my daughter, are in great danger..."

Subaru sighed. "And the first responsibility of a lord is to protect his vassals," He finished with a sigh.

"Just so. And I can assure you, Master," Koi continued, "Whatever medicine you require in Kocytos, I am well equipped to procure it for you."

Subaru looked thoughtful for a moment and then nodded. "Meili?" He called over his shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Are the Goki nearby?" Subaru asked.

Koi blinked in confusion, wondering if she had misheard him.

Meili nodded. "Yeah. They're not far away. I'll call them if you want them. But what would you want them *for*?"

"I need to make a bit of a statement," Subaru said. "People need to know what happens when they screw with me. We're going to head over to Lady Koi's estate. Elsa, Koi, and I will deal with a problem there. Meili, you stay behind with the Guiltylowe and other mabeasts and protect Anri and Emilia."

"OK," Meili said a bit somberly.

Subaru cocked his head. "Something wrong?" Subaru asked.

Meili sighed. "Not really. I just feel bad missing out on how you're going to outsmart your foes with the Goki again..."

Subaru chuckled. "Don't worry, Meili. You're not missing anything. I'm not doing anything clever this time. I'm just going for shock value."

"Oh. Well, that's a relief," Meili said, her face brightening.

The courtyard of Koi's estate was full of bodies that night.

Senko stood protected by a circle of Dreyfus's best men. None were unbloodied but none were ready to surrender yet.

Senko had tried to escape with her Mother but Gatz had betrayed them and sent the pair into a desperate flight. Koi had attempted to draw pursuit away from her daughter. While she had succeeded, Senko had no skill or experience at concealing a trail through the wilds. She'd been located and it was only by a desperate flight back to the estate that Senko had been spared immediate capture and death or worse.

Senko held only a small dagger. She had no training with weapons but she had always held it as a backup tool, a trait that she'd picked up from her mother. She held it purely to ensure that she wouldn't be captured and subjected to days or weeks of Zeno's hospitality.

Cynthia stood beside Senko, the blond woman's face as grim as death. She'd been here for a meeting with Koi when Zeno had attacked and now she was an unexpected bonus prize for the thug.

Bodies were everywhere, more of Zeno's men than of Koi's but when Zeno had attacked, he had brought nearly three men for every one of hers. Worse, Koi had discovered that several in her employee had been on Zeno's payroll.

Fortunately, none of those traitors had survived. Senko took grim satisfaction in that.

Dreyfus was bloodied but unbowed and he held his position at the point of his men, daring more of Zeno's soldiers to come at him.

For the moment, they held back and the courtyard turned battlefield was calm and quiet.

"Lady Senko," Dreyfus whispered. "I'm sorry but I don't think we can hold back another wave," He admitted.

Senko's lips tightened. She'd never heard Dreyfus sound defeated before. "Thank you, Dreyfus," She murmured.

Senko looked at Cynthia. The woman looked back with a hard expression. The two had never had a relationship. Senko wasn't even certain if Cynthia had known she was Koi's daughter until the past few days. Cynthia had been by no means an aunt to Senko. She barely qualified as her Mother's friend. She was a business associate who had never attempted to kill Koi and that was about as close to friendship as one usually got in the Black Silver Coins.

Cynthia was a hard woman. She'd grown up in the Coins. Her father and older brother had both been Bosses of the Lagunican Coins until their deaths when Cynthia needed to step in and try to hold the organization together after it and her family were nearly destroyed by that Vollachian hussy her brother had fallen in 'love' with. Cynthia had hoped to avoid her father and brother's bad habits of being murdered by rivals but that was looking less likely now.

Zeno's soldiers stirred at the entrance of the manor's courtyard. They parted like the sea and through their ranks strolled Zeno. He stood head and shoulders above his men

and his face was fixed in a wicked grin.

He walked calmly through the courtyard, followed by his most trusted warriors. Aperitif walked a few steps behind him, the elf wearing pink silks and standing out like a sore thumb.

"Hey there, little fox," He said mockingly to Senko. "Where's the big fox hiding?"

Senko raised her chin defiantly. "She got away!" She said in a quavering voice.

Zeno looked annoyed. Then he started to smile. "Well, I'm sure she'll be back to get you. I promised the men that they could play with Koi before I finished her off. They'll be disappointed she got away but I bet the two of you would do just as well."

Cynthia scowled and Senko turned pale. She gripped the knife hidden in her pocket more tightly.

"What is the point of all this?" Cynthia snapped. "What is it that killing us will bring Scrofa? If you burn down our divisions then you'll spend whatever is left of your life rebuilding them! You'd be an old, old man before they showed a profit again!"

Zeno smirked. "The Boss and I have the same angle on this: What matters is, they're *mine*."

Cynthia shook her head in disgust. She'd met a lot of men like Zeno and Scrofa over the years, men who only cared about what they could *take* as opposed to what they could have. Spoiled children in men's bodies who would lust for something, take it, smash it out of boredom, and then move on to some new toy.

"I'm actually debating keeping Koi around for a while," Zeno chuckled. "It might amuse me to keep her as a mistress."

Cynthia rolled her eyes. "Have you ever met a woman that you didn't want to make your personal whore?" Cynthia said in disgust. "They never seem to last long in your service!"

Zeno smirked. "I'm wondering how low I can make Koi sink using her daughter as an inducement. She'll do whatever I say or I'll make her wear little Senko as a fur stole."

Senko turned white.

Cynthia grimaced. "Zeno. That is *disgusting* even by your standards!"

Zeno just laughed. "If you surrender, maybe I'll keep you around with the foxes for a while. That way I could watch the three of you 'play' together."

"Hardly an inducement, Zeno," Cynthia said witheringly. "I'd be more likely to surrender if you promised to kill me without touching me! And how do you see this little venture of yours ending? Do you really think that Taiyang will just *ignore* what you're doing?!"

Zeno chuckled. "I made a deal to get rid of 'Taiyang.' A full team of Acolyte Knights is lying in wait to put him down."

Cynthia cocked her head, considering that for a moment. "Do you *really* think that will work?" She asked skeptically.

Zeno snorted. "It might! And if not, I have evidence, sighed by Koi's lieutenants," Zeno gestured at two bodies lying in the courtyard. "Confessing that you and Koi setting up the ambush that attacked him!"

Cynthia's lips tightened.

Zeno snickered. "Great plan, right?"

Senko took a deep breath and pulled herself erect, trying to look as foreboding as her Mother could when she was angry. She didn't succeed all that well. "You're a fool, Zeno," Senko snapped in a shrill voice. "You've always been a fool. Too quick to act and not quick enough to think."

Zeno scowled. "What are you talking about?"

Senko wasn't sure herself but stalling was about all she had left to work with. She wracked her mind trying to come up with a strategy.

Behind Zeno, the courtyard gate exploded and his men went flying in all directions.

Zeno spun around to look and Cynthia craned her neck to see what fresh threat this was.

The courtyard grew chill and dark. A strong wind began to blow across the courtyard.

Standing in the slowly settling dust where the gate used to be was a terrifying black silhouette of a man. Standing beside him was a beautiful young woman with long dark hair.

Senko saw Koi, hiding behind them in her hood.

Mother! Senko thought. *She found Taiyang!*

Zeno's forces stumbled back and Zeno's mouth became a grim slash.

"I know what you did, Zeno," The shadowy monster called in an inhuman voice.

"Lord Taiyang," Zeno said slowly.

"You sound surprised to see me," Taiyang observed.

Zeno took a deep breath. "I'm here because of the treachery of your minion, lord!" He pointed at Koi. "I heard that the fox had sold you out to Sanshi and I came here to punish her!"

Zeno scowled at Koi, waiting to see how she would react.

Koi said nothing. Her face was smooth and even. Koi had decided long ago that when falsely accused, silence was often the best strategy. If you let someone spin a web of lies long enough, they might find themselves being the ones tied up in it.

"Strange that you came *here* instead of coming to help me," Taiyang said.

Senko hid a smile. *Nice try, Zeno*, Senko thought, feeling almost giddy. *He knows that you're lying. I don't know how he knows but he knows and you're not leaving here alive!*

Zeno hesitated. "I know my limitations, Master," He said finally. "If a foe can threaten you, I'm certainly no match for him. So I-"

"You talked," Taiyang whispered.

Zeno blinked.

"Gatz revealed to me what you did," Taiyang asserted. He walked toward the hulking Zeno with no apparent concern.

Zeno's troops melted out of the Witch's way. They backed away from their master, leaving Zeno standing isolated in the center of the courtyard. The beautiful woman who had accompanied Taiyang leaned casually against a wall, content to simply watch the show. Koi hesitated beside her for a moment and then took a chance, bolting across the courtyard and catching Senko in her arms. The two kitsune clung tightly together.

"He's one of Koi's thugs!" Zeno blustered. "Of course he implicated me! It was the only way to save his-"

"He told me the truth, Zeno," Taiyang whispered. "A man doesn't lie when you're holding his liver in your hands."

The beautiful woman leaning against the wall closed her eyes and made a soft sound of remembered contentment.

Zeno took a step back but then held his ground with a snarl. "I've got a hundred men here! You think that you can take us all?!"

Zeno's men stared at their master in disbelief. They wanted no part of this fight.

Taiyang looked at the trembling men and laughed. "I don't imagine they'll be joining the fun," He whispered as he closed in on Zeno.

Zeno choked and threw a punch at Taiyang's face.

Taiyang didn't even bother to block it and the blow landed with a sound like thunder. Zeno's enormous fist hit Taiyang's body with all the effect of a raindrop striking a brick wall.

Taiyang kicked Zeno's thigh and the bone snapped like a twig.

Zeno screamed and started to fall to the ground but Taiyang grabbed him by the throat and held him up.

Senko's eyes widened as Zeno struggled helplessly in Taiyang's gripe. Zeno's face grew blurry as if it was being viewed through the water of a raging river.

Zeno trembled in Taiyang's grip, feeling as if he was being hollowed out and emptied.

Finally, Taiyang let Zeno go and the hulking man crashed to the ground. Zeno's skin looked gray as he lay there, panting for breath.

Zeno fought to get back to his feet. It took nearly a minute of effort but Zeno was famous for his indomitable will and he finally stood up.

"What did... you do to me?" Zeno asked, sounding exhausted.

Senko frowned. It might be her imagination but she thought that Taiyang might look a little bigger and more imposing. But it was hard to tell through his shadow.

"I permitted you to make a small contribution to my welfare," Taiyang whispered. "I assure you that you were delicious. Take comfort in that as you die."

Zeno snorted. "So now you're going to kill me?" He said, sounding unimpressed.

"No. I shall not kill you," Taiyang replied.

Zeno turned his attention to the strange woman who had arrived with Taiyang but she made no sign of moving either.

Nothing happened.

Senko's ear twitched. She heard a loud buzzing sound in the distance.

Zeno scowled. "What are you-"

Zeno's words trailed off as the stars were blotted out by an enormous swarm of insects that filled the sky.

Koi gasped and tried to hold Senko even tighter.

The Goki swarm gathered high overhead and then dove at Zeno and only at Zeno, coating him with biting insects.

Zeno fought to tear off the bugs but there were simply too many biting insects to make any headway. Zeno punched a few of the largest Goki but fists are not a good weapon to use against a swarm of insects. He slapped at them and tried to rip them off his skin but for every one he removed, ten more were waiting impatiently to join in. Worse, every time he opened his mouth or tried to inhale, the smallest Goki fought to climb into his nose and mouth.

Zeno choked and fought to blow the invading insects back out of his air passages but the tiny bugs held on tenaciously, biting and tearing whatever flesh they could.

Zeno's soldiers could only watch in horror. Their weapons were no use against this enormous swarm. A few out of sheer desperation, tried shooting arrows at the swarm but while the arrows likely killed a few bugs they also plunged deep inside of Zeno's back and gave the Goki access to the soft, tender meat under Zeno's rhino-like skin.

After less than a minute, Zeno was doubled over. Ignoring the swarm biting and tearing his skin, he struggled to get the bugs out of his nose and throat. His lungs worked like a bellows but for each Goki he managed to push out of his lungs, three more were sucked in on the inhale and they were pulled all the way down into his soft, wet lungs.

Where the Goki feasted.

The Goki worked diligently, tearing Zeno apart from the inside out.

Zeno kept coughing, trying to force the bugs as well as the steadily increasing pool of blood out of his lungs.

Finally, Zeno collapsed. He landed on his face in the courtyard. Normally this would have crushed quite a few Goki but with Subaru's guidance, the swarm dodged his fall and relit upon the prostrate body.

The feast began in earnest here.

Cynthia and Aperitif both looked on in horror.

Taiyang turned his attention toward Aperitif and the rest of Zeno's men. He took one step toward them.

"Wait!" A hulking, brown-skinned man shouted. "We surrender!"

Taiyang cocked his head.

"I am Farouk. I worked for Zeno for many years. My men, they are fierce fighters. And loyal!" The man emphasized. "When Zeno ordered us to fight, we followed him. We followed him to death, yes? If we follow you, we will be loyal to you unto death!"

Taiyang seemed to consider this. "Someone once told me to blame the person who ordered the attack not the hired blade," He murmured.

Senko noticed that the beautiful woman who was still lounging against the wall had nodded at this statement.

"Yes. We follow orders!" Farouk exclaimed. "We follow orders *well*. We'll follow your orders if you'll only give us a chance!"

"Me too!" Aperitif squeaked. "Give me the chance and I will gratefully call you Master!"

Taiyang looked at Aperitif. "You are an *underboss* of the Coins, are you not? You didn't just follow orders. You gave them."

Aperitif swallowed hard. "Look. I... I'm not a fighter! I couldn't refuse Zeno! I just provide pleasures. I own houses all across the continent that cater to every vice imaginable! I'm sure that we can work something out!"

Taiyang considered that. "An intriguing offer but to be blunt, I must admit my reservations," Taiyang said, sounding unimpressed. "I doubt that anything you could offer me would arouse the passions of a witch of the Old World."

Aperitif nodded with a pathetically eager smile on his face. "I can offer anything, Master! Just name it! How about... a cute little fox girl slave?" He suggested with a leer at Senko and Koi.

Koi hissed at him. Senko scowled and for the first time in her life, she found herself fantasizing about doing hideous things to a man with a fondue fork. Then she saw Taiyang's finger twitch through his shadow and Senko's face softened into a smirk.

"Elsa," Taiyang called.

The beautiful woman lazing against the wall walked over to Taiyang, her eyes were lidded with pleasure and her expression was superior.

"Elsa," Taiyang murmured. "I would like you to sample this man's... pleasures," He murmured. "See if he can satisfy you."

Elsa's face brightened.

Aperitif looked confused at being asked to entertain this woman personally but he wasn't stupid enough to object. "Of course, Master. I'm... extremely talented at offering satisfaction to my customers," He murmured as Elsa walked forward and gently took his arm. "I'll bring great pleasure to your... friend."

Koi shook her head. *Aperitif has no idea whom he's about to 'entertain.' I almost pity him. He really is a fool.*

"Koi," Taiyang said.

Koi snapped to attention. "Yes, Master?" She called.

"Your men appear to require medical attention. See to them. I shall call upon you to attend me in a few minutes."

Koi nodded immediately. "Of course, Master. Thank you."

Koi gestured and her men began to stagger back inside her manor. None had escaped injury and some needed to be carried by their brethren.

Cynthia gave Koi a sharp look. Koi thought a moment and then nodded. A deal was established in a single gesture.

Cynthia wants to get in good with Taiyang and she recognizes that I'm the key to that. She'll be obedient to me in exchange.

Cynthia, Koi, and Senko followed the exhausted guards inside.

Taiyang ignored Aperitif and walked forward to address Zeno's troops. Several of the men stepped back and Farouk turned pale. He held his ground by sheer force of will.

"I have decided to accept your fealty," Taiyang murmured.

Zeno's forces sighed in relief.

"However, in order to get us off on the proper foot," Taiyang continued. "I desire you to observe what befalls those who betray me. Please, pay close attention."

Taiyang gestured toward Elsa.

"Master?" Elsa asked curiously.

"Elsa, I desire you to put on a demonstration of your talents with that man," Taiyang murmured, pointing at Aperitif. "I desire you make the situation of my foes plain and clear to all. These men," Taiyang gestured at the soldiers, "Are required to remain here until your demonstration is complete. Anyone who attempts to run or interfere with you will also be added to your list of toys."

Taiyang turned around and walked into the house.

Aperitif and all the soldiers stared at the departing witch in confusion, pondering what he meant.

Elsa's eyes widened and she looked at Subaru with something akin to awe. It was as if a whole new world had been opened up to her.

An Audience... I never even imagined it before. Normally, anyone who watched me work would be next on the list of my toys to play with. But these men are going to see my art and they'll survive... They'll remember the subtle craft of my skills. And they'll be changed forever by that experience as any great work of art changes the people in its audience!

It was amazing. It was revelatory. Elsa felt like she could have kissed Subaru. And later on, she might well try.

A few minutes later, Subaru was guided to Koi's sitting room.

He entered to find Cynthia, Koi, and Senko all on their knees with their heads bowed.

"Great Taiyang," Koi whispered. "We are eternally grateful for your gallant rescue. Forgive me for failing to anticipate Zeno's perfidy."

Subaru sat down on a sofa. "I hold you blameless, Lady Koi," Subaru muttered, wishing that they could hurry the preliminaries along. "He was foolish enough to think that he could defeat me. How could you be expected to anticipate the actions of a fool?"

"Thank you for your generosity, Master," Koi murmured, gracefully rising to her seat and sitting on the sofa beside him. Cynthia also rose and took her seat in a chair while Senko remained kneeling on the floor and began to pour tea for the others. "What is it you wish of us?"

Subaru drummed his hands for a moment. "Zeno has caused me much trouble. I will require your assistance to rectify this situation."

"You need simply name it, Master. How can I... satisfy you?" Koi whispered. Koi was feeling much more confident around Taiyang now that she'd seen what lay under his shadow. His spell of fear persisted but she was able to manage it much better now. Taiyang wasn't some dark god, he was a man. A powerful and dangerous man to be sure but he was still just a man and that meant he had a man's vices.

And Koi was extremely skilled at taking advantage of those.

Subaru pretended that he hadn't heard her transparent invitation or noticed the way Koi's tail was rubbing against his leg.

Note to self: When visiting Koi, only sit in the chair. It helps keep Koi at arm's length.

"Zeno has destroyed my lair and my lab," Subaru said. "He has set my work back considerably. I will need to find a new residence and a new lab."

"Allow me, Master," Cynthia said quickly. "Zeno has also caused me much upheaval. Several of my breweries are now defunct of talented alchemists to craft my liquors. I would be only too happy to deliver my best quality equipment to wherever you wish."

"I believe I can assist with this as well," Koi broke in, unwilling to let Cynthia get ahead of her in courting Taiyang's favor. "My people are very skilled at shipping delicate materials. And I will ensure that your supplies are fully stocked."

Cynthia and Koi smiled politely at one another.

Senko watched the women closely as she poured a cup of tea. She silently ruled this round of their contest to win Taiyang's favor a draw.

"Most generous of you," Subaru whispered. "I have a reward for you then."

Subaru took out a small vial of emerald liquid and handed it to Cynthia.

"What is it, Master?" Cynthia asked.

"*Soma*," Subaru replied. "An extremely potent narcotic and stimulant. I believe this will help you both rebuild your finances."

Cynthia and Koi shared an intrigued look.

"Can it be made in quantity?" Cynthia asked.

"Easily," Subaru muttered. "Taiyang takes care of his agents. I will make you what you require and we will all share in the profits."

"Sounds splendid, Master," Koi murmured.

"I will need my new lab as soon as possible," Subaru muttered. "When can we arrange equipment to be delivered?"

"Forgive me, Master," Koi murmured, "But deliver it where?"

Subaru was silent for a moment. "Ah yes. My lair was destroyed. I will need to procure a new one."

"Simplicity itself, Master," Koi whispered. "I have a guest house on my lands. Nothing would bring me greater pleasure than to show you... hospitality..."

Senko watched Cynthia frown but she didn't say anything. Cynthia clearly accepted Koi as having the right to primacy in their relationship with Taiyang.

Subaru mulled it over. *Well, it's not like I have any other options at the moment.*

"I believe that will be acceptable."

"A wonderful idea," Cynthia agreed, her tone slightly insincere. "I hope that you will find it most commodious."

Subaru nodded. "Very well. I shall take up dwelling there tonight. How soon can you have my supplies and equipment prepared?"

Cynthia and Koi shared a look. "I'm sure we can have everything arranged by lunch tomorrow, Master. If that meets with your approval," Cynthia said. Their men would simply not get any sleep tonight.

"Excellent," Subaru murmured. "You have both pleased me greatly."

"Lady Cynthia," Koi murmured. "Perhaps you should go get the ball rolling. My men are standing by to ship whatever you wish from wherever you say."

Cynthia nodded and stood up. Cynthia understood Koi's words and was unsurprised. Koi had allowed her as much direct access to the Master tonight as she was comfortable with and now it was time for Cynthia to leave so that Koi could consolidate her position as Taiyang's lieutenant.

Cynthia quietly left the room.

"Was there something else?" Subaru murmured.

Koi smiled and bowed her head. "I merely wished to express my boundless gratitude to your lordship. Both for saving my life and for your safekeeping of my precious daughter. I assure you, Master. My loyalty to you goes far deeper than my purse."

"Yes, Master," Senko added quietly. "You may forever more consider us your most faithful servants: to speak or to be silent, to do or let be."

Subaru nodded.

"My daughter speaks for both of us, Master," Koi said in dulcet tones. "Our purpose is to please you. You need simply command us and we shall obey."

"There is one more matter to address," Subaru said, ignoring Koi's tail that continued stroking his leg. "A problem occurred during my efforts to capture the spirits..."

Farouk had been summoned to meet with Taiyang in Koi's meeting chamber. Elsa walked beside him, humming contentedly with a dreamy expression on her face but Farouk flinched every time the assassin moved. Farouk was a veteran of countless battles. He was a fighter proved to be stern and merciless enough to be Zeno's right hand man for years. But he'd never had an experience like tonight.

Most of his men were now broken husks. Some of them were even in tears. His men were hardened criminals. Zeno's forces did security for Scrofa. They specialized in robbery, banditry, protection rackets, and loan-sharking. These men were no strangers to violence but to observe the Bowel Hunter in her craft had horrified even them.

Elsa had immobilized Aperitif, tying him spread-eagle with ropes. She had gaged him and then proceeded to cut the man slowly apart. She'd done so with the care and craft of a professor instructing a dull-witted classroom.

With each slice, Elsa had separated Aperitif into pieces and demonstrated how the bleeding could be minimized as long as all major blood vessels were carefully avoided. Periodically she had removed Aperitif's gag to allow him to provide constructive feedback on her technique but the pimp and prostitute was not very coherent by then.

As time went on, Elsa 'invited' each of Farouk's men to examine and get hands-on experience with Aperitif's entrails. She had pontificated at length on the color, texture, and elasticity of each bit of viscera.

Then each person was 'encouraged' to place his hands into Aperitif's guts and sense the warmth and beauty of a human life.

Elsa was exacting in her lesson and her technique. To drag out the life of the subject as long as possible, each cut must be made in precise order. Each component removed in sequence.

Aperitif had been *opened* like a skinned carcass. His body was held together by slender strands of flesh and cords of veins. It had taken Aperitif nearly an hour to die. Not from shock or dismemberment, Aperitif had only died when Elsa finally decided that the lesson was over. Elsa had politely thanked Aperitif for his assistance before delicately severing his aorta.

It was only when an ocean of blood spilled out onto the ground that Farouk had made the stunning realization of how little blood had actually been shed up until now. Elsa could have kept Aperitif alive in that condition for days had she so wished.

Then Elsa had spoken to each man personally, inviting him to share his experiences with the group and what he had learned from the demonstration.

The men were barely coherent at that point, each one only able to assure Elsa that she was correct and that the experience that she had shared with all of them had indeed been 'life changing.'

Elsa and Farouk entered the room and found the shadowy figure of Taiyang waiting for them. Koi and Senko were present as well.

"Elsa," Taiyang murmured. "I have a task for you."

Elsa smiled. "Name it."

"Return to your sister and prepare to depart. Lady Koi has graciously lent us a carriage to travel in."

Elsa made a face. "That's nice and all, Master but I think that Meili would rather ride her pet."

There was a long pause. "The carriage is for the girls, Elsa. Especially the ones that are unconscious," Taiyang said in a clipped voice.

"Oh. That makes sense," Elsa nodded.

"Farouk," Taiyang whispered in a voice like the winter wind.

Farouk jumped. "Master?"

"Lady Koi is to be my primary agent among the Coins," Taiyang continued. "You will carry out her instructions in my name."

Farouk immediately nodded. "Yes, Master. Without fail."

Koi had a very self-satisfied look on her face.

It was the wee hours of the morning. In the forest glade, Emilia seemed to be resting more comfortably now that she'd had her medicine but she was still unconscious. Anri paced back and forth. The entire evening had been just surreal.

Subaru had rescued them with the help of notorious mass murderer Elsa Granhiert as well as with a horde of apparently tame mabeasts. Now Anri was left waiting in the woods with the sleeping Emilia and a little girl who was reclining on top of a massive Guiltylowe, cooing and caressing it as if the monster was a kitten.

Elsa and Subaru had been gone for a while. Anri was starting to worry that Elsa might have double-crossed him. But even if that was the case, Anri knew that there was nothing she could do. She was surrounded by enough mabeasts to take on a small army.

Finally, out of sheer frustration with her helplessness, Anri opened her mouth: "I don't think I caught your name."

The little girl glanced at her. "I told you. I'm Meili."

"What's your role in all this?"

Meili shrugged. "I don't know. Whatever Subaru says it is, I guess."

Anri narrowed her eyes. "So, you... *and Elsa* work for Subaru?!"

"Yeah. He rescued us when Mother was going to kill us. Actually, I think at first he was going to kill us too but we convinced him that we'd behave."

"And he *believed* you?!"

Meili snorted. "We don't have a lot of options here. If we betray Subaru, he'll kill us. If we make him mad and then by some miracle we manage to escape him, Mother will hunt us down and kill us *for* him."

"Mother?"

"Mother Capella. She's the head of the Assassin's Organization. We used to work for her."

Anri stared. "Why would you ever work for someone like that?"

For the first time, Meili looked distinctly annoyed. She climbed up off her Guiltylowe and marched right over to Anri. Despite being older by several years and more than a head taller, it was Anri who took a step back.

"Because she *made* us," Meili said as if speaking to a simpleton. "We didn't apply for the job! If Mother wanted you, she sent someone to bring you back: dead or alive. And once you were in the organization your choice was to do what Mother said or be tortured to death for your disobedience. And even if you *did* do everything she said, sooner or later she'd torture you to death just because she got frustrated and needed to vent it!"

Anri looked ill. "I'm sorry. That... sounds truly awful."

Meili snorted and laid back down on her Guiltylowe. "Yeah. So when Subaru offered us an out, it wasn't a hard decision. Subaru is the only person in the world who might be able to protect us from Mother so it behooves us to keep him happy."

Anri digested that. "What do you know about Elsa?"

"She's my Big Sis!" Meili said with pride.

"She killed a lot of my friends," Anri said venomously. "Do you know that?"

"Well, of course," Meili said, sounding completely unbothered. "She's an assassin. That's what she *does*."

Anri stared at Meili with her jaw hanging open. Meili had explained this to Anri in the same tone she might have used if Anri had asked her where the sun goes at night.

Anri was still trying to decide how to respond to this girl who refused to behave like a human being when she heard a rustle in the bushes and Elsa walked into the clearing.

Anri jumped back, her eyes huge.

"Hey, Big Sis," Meili called.

"Subaru wants us to gather near Koi's place. She's giving us a carriage to take us to Siros."

Anri's heart leaped.

"Any trouble with the fighting down there?" Meili asked, getting up and stretching.

Elsa's face became dreamy. "Oh, Meili. I made a simply *wonderful* discovery tonight. I can't wait to tell you all about it."

Meili looked quizzical.

Elsa glanced at Anri. "Would you like to carry Emilia or should I?" She asked politely.

Anri bit her lip. "How do I know that I can trust you?" She demanded.

Elsa frowned. "Trust me to do what?"

Anri scowled. "You told me that Subaru said for us to go down there. How do I know you're not lying? What if you betrayed Subaru and now you're trying to lure me into a trap?" Anri shouted, her face bright red.

Meili and Elsa shared an incredulous look.

Elsa smiled at Anri. "I don't think you've put as much thought into this little theory of yours as you think you have," She commented.

Anri looked affronted. "What do you mean?"

Before Anri could even put up her hands, Elsa was close enough to kiss her. Anri tried to leap back but Elsa gently grabbed her shoulders and held her still.

"I mean," Elsa said politely, smiling down at the girl like a cat would smirk at a mouse. "That I'm here and so is Meili and several dozen mabeasts. If we wanted to kill you, you'd have absolutely no way to stop us."

Anri shuddered at Elsa's tone. She spoke with a kind of sweet erudition that made the conversation even more surreal.

"I don't want you dead," Elsa continued in the same calm tone. "*Mother* did. Now that I've betrayed Mother, I have no reason to harm you. Especially since Subaru wants you alive."

Anri took a deep breath. "You killed a dozen of my friends!" She hissed.

"I know, dear. I was there," Elsa reminded her in a faintly patronizing voice. "Would an apology make everything better?"

"No!"

Elsa looked thoughtful. "Then I'm not really sure what you want me to say," Elsa continued. "I really *don't* care about you, Kairei. I didn't even care about you when I was trying to kill you. I don't care about your friends or how they died. It means nothing to me if *you* live or die. Honestly, if you wanted to run off into the night and take your chances, I'd say good riddance. The problem is that the Master *does* care about you. He says that he wants you to come with us and so long as he says that, you're going to come. You can come willingly or I'll take you by force. It's entirely up to you," Elsa said reasonably.

Anri's face was chalk-white. She stared up at Elsa, panting for breath.

Elsa's warm smile never flickered.

Anri took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Alright," She muttered. "Let's go."

Subaru sat in the carriage with Emilia's head in his lap as he stroked her hair.

Anri sat across from him. Her face was stony.

While Subaru would have preferred to scout ahead with Elsa and make sure that the road was safe, he made a concession to reality.

Anri was feeling really quite betrayed right now so Subaru had decided to travel with Anri and answer her questions.

Koi had taken pains to ensure that the carriage driver had no idea whom he was transporting, he had simply met the group in the forest.

Meili had been intrigued by the idea of the carriage and had asked to steer it which the driver had politely declined.

At which point, Elsa had equally politely suggested that unpleasant things might occur if her little sister wasn't given what she wanted.

Now Meili drove the carriage with Elsa and Koi's servant on top. The ride had been bumpy and prone to many abrupt stops and starts but Meili hadn't hit anything yet.

Patrasche followed the carriage closely as did the mabeasts, the monsters keeping carefully out of sight.

Inside the carriage, the silence became protracted.

"You're not going to say anything?" Subaru grumbled.

Anri scowled at him. "You've been lying to me the whole time."

"Not true," Subaru replied calmly. "I just didn't tell you everything. I never lied to you. Also, I don't think I would raise that objection if I were you. Because you *have* been lying to me since the day we met. Four times that I know of."

Anri flushed. "What the hell have you been doing with Elsa?!" She hissed.

Subaru noted that she had not responded to his accusation of her duplicity but he let it slide for now. "I used Elsa and Meili to savage the Sanshi army at Siros. Now we can bring you home. I investigated the letter you found and discovered Elsa and Meili just like I told you. I wound up bumping into Capella and I managed to drive her off."

"How did you do that?" Anri frowned. "I thought you said that she was immortal."

Subaru hesitated. "I said I drove her off, not killed her," He said evasively. "Anyway, Capella was going to kill Elsa and Meili until I showed up and chased her away. They thought that they were already dead. When they found out I could fend off Capella, they realized they had another option and they volunteered to work for me. Elsa almost killed me, Anri. She tried to kill *Emilia*. Believe me, nobody wanted her dead more than me. But I didn't have that luxury. I needed help to win your little war and this was the only help I could find."

Anri pondered that for a moment. "What makes you so sure you can trust her? She might betray you at the first chance she gets."

Subaru shook his head. "Elsa and Meili are the walking dead and they know it. If they double-cross me, I don't even have to kill them. I just have to let it be known that I won't protect them anymore and then set an hourglass to wait until Capella swoops in to get her revenge. Trust me, Capella would do things to them that I could never dream of."

Anri rested her head on her hand and thought for a while. "I'm not happy with you, Subaru," She said bluntly.

Subaru looked at her with annoyance. "I shall strive not to sink below my anguish but to struggle onward," Subaru grumbled sarcastically.

Anri sputtered and fumed. Her face was bright red and she took a deep breath. "From now on you are going to tell me *everything*," She said firmly.

Subaru looked at her. "No," He said, turning his attention back to Emilia.

Anri's jaw dropped. "*Excuse me?!'*"

Subaru whirled on her with flames in his eyes. "I've excused you quite enough already!" Subaru hissed in a deadly voice.

Anri blanched and pulled away from him. It was subtle but Subaru suddenly looked... unnatural. There was an eerie chill in the carriage and Subaru's face seemed to flicker in the pale light.

"Let's get a few things straight," Subaru said. "I owe you *nothing*. I saved your life, even after you abandoned Emilia in Stoneybrooke and even after you got her *kidnapped*. Malcolm Griest would have never cared about Emilia *at all* if not for you! You've done nothing but lie to me since the day that we met and now you seem to have this weird theory that I owe *you* the truth when the reality is that I should have kicked you out the instant that I caught you lying to me. Got to love the entitlement of the nobility," He said with contempt. "You act like you're so much better than Elsa and Meili but at least they've been straight with me. At least *they've* made themselves useful! All you've done is babysit Emilia and make messes for me to clean up! You don't like how I do things? There's the door. Get out and go wherever the hell you want."

Anri glared at Subaru and grit her teeth.

Subaru scowled back at her, looking unimpressed. "Don't you dare *ever* try to give me an order again. You're not my boss, we just have a deal. I win your war for you and you give me the Ebony Stone."

Anri's face darkened. "I said that I could *tell* you where it was. I never told you I had it."

Subaru glared at her. "Then where is it?"

Anri took a deep breath and leaned back. She stared at Subaru with loathing. "I'm not home yet, am I?" She asked mockingly.

Subaru matched her gaze for a long moment and then turned away with a sneer of contempt.

He turned his attention back toward Emilia and his expression softened as he gently stroked her hair.

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 9**

Subaru and Anri arrived in Siros early that morning. As Subaru had instructed, Meili and Elsa had made themselves scarce before they entered the city to ensure Anri didn't get any bright ideas about taking revenge on the assassin.

Anri's return to Siros and the official end of the siege were received with an enormous celebration. The streets leading to palace were swarmed with crowds for miles, all cheering and offering up praise for their princess.

She leaned out the carriage window waving with a beatific smile on her face.

Subaru sat there, feeling bored as they approached the palace.

As soon as Anri had finished hugging her Uncle and Grandfather, they had all gone into the conference room to make plans.

Subaru had gently laid Emilia down on a nearby sofa before joining them at the conference table.

Radu was a tall, thin man with ashen-blond hair and mournful lines carved into his face. Gustov was just as tall but heavier. He had a bushy gray beard and a face that fell easily into laugh lines.

Subaru was only half-listening as Anri explained everything that Subaru had done over the past few days.

Or at least everything that she knows I did...

Then Radu and Gustov proceeded to fill Anri into everything that had happened in her absence.

Subaru kept slipping into *Reason and Judgment* to analyze the full ramifications of these details.

Before they were even half-way through their report, Subaru had put his head down on the conference table and covered his head with his hands.

"Subaru," Anri asked with mock concern. "Is something vexing you?"

Subaru slowly lifted his head and looked at the two men who were regarding him with bafflement.

Subaru took a deep breath. "I need to ask because I am genuinely curious," Subaru began, struggling to control his temper. "What made anyone think that it was a good idea to permit an enemy army to retreat down a long, winding trail through the mountains and not raise a single finger to hinder them?!" He finished in a hiss.

Radu rolled his eyes. "Young man," He said patronizingly. "Military tactics are-"

"Clearly not your forte!" Subaru cut him off. "What's worse is, not only did you blow your greatest chance to end the war once and for all but it's clear from the way you're talking that you *still* don't comprehend just how much trouble you're in!"

Radu's jaw dropped. He felt nothing but shock at being rebuked this way by someone less than half his age. He would be furious at being addressed in this insolent way by an untitled foreigner, just as soon as his mind cleared enough for him to remember *how* to be furious.

Anri frowned. "Subaru, what do you mean?" Anri asked.

Subaru sighed. "Stop and think about it for a minute. In spite of all the running around I spent the past week doing and all the damage I caused, what has Griest really lost?"

"I don't understand," She said.

"His entire army is still *intact* and altogether it's three times your size. The second column I blocked lost its officers, nothing else. Once that column is properly integrated into the first army they'll just all march up here together. Griest will make sure that they have enough provisions to last them for weeks this time! There'll be nothing to stop them from burning your city to the ground at that point!"

Anri's jaw dropped.

Subaru turned back to the two older men who both looked shocked. "My question," Subaru said, barely containing his fury. "Is *what* were you thinking when they started to withdrawal and you did *nothing* to take advantage of the situation?"

Radu and Gustov shared a guilty expression. "We... thought it might have been a trap," Radu mumbled.

Subaru's jaw dropped. This statement made so little sense that he was literally struck speechless.

A trap?! Are you kidding me?! How in the hell could this have been a trap? The only way the Sanshi army could have been any more vulnerable is if they had handed you their weapons before they left!

"Well," Anri said in a conciliatory tone. "Even if it wasn't a great military decision, it might still be useful politically. If we'd had a messy battle and blooded their noses, it would have been harder for Griest to come to the negotiating table. Now he doesn't have to choke on his ego."

Subaru stared at Anri incredulously. *I'm surrounded by morons!*

"Anri," Subaru said slowly. "Griest *won't* negotiate with you. He can't."

"What are you talking about?"

Subaru took a deep breath and broke it down for them. "Anri, remember when you told me about all the mercenaries he hired?"

"Yes."

"That was *really* expensive, Anri," He said as if speaking to a small child. "I'd bet you every gold coin I've ever seen that the Sanshi treasuries are almost empty. He also raised a huge army from his own lands. That means he conscripted a massive number of peasant workers and took them away from their villages in early spring when they needed to be working in the fields. So Sanshi is *way* behind schedule in planting new crops!

"Griest has mortgaged his people's future on this war. He gambled and he nearly lost. For Malcolm Griest, a negotiated ceasefire is just as bad as if you defeated him outright. It means his whole investment is down the tubes. If he doesn't claim Siros and gain all its wealth and resources then he'll have a rebellion on his hands this winter. He won't negotiate with you. He can't."

Anri stared at him and she moistened her suddenly bloodless lips. "What are you saying?" She whispered.

Subaru sighed. "If you'd bothered to *capture* his army, he'd be out of options right now and he'd be forced to surrender. But you treated this war like something that could be reset like a chessboard at the end of a game. Now there's nothing stopping him from marching all of his forces back up to try *again* and he has literally *no* choice except to do that if he has any desire to keep his crown!"

Anri, Radu, and Gustov all looked horrified.

"What do we do?" Anri whispered.

Why am I even bothering helping these idiots?

Well, I'm committed now. I just need to find out where the Stone is and then get out of here.

"March. Now," He said shortly.

"March?!" Anri asked.

"Your army is rested and prepared to take the field," Subaru grumbled. "March your army down to Kocytos and take the city before the Sanshi armies regroup. Keep Malcolm Griest on the back foot so he can't bring his full force to bear against you again."

Everyone at the table stared at Subaru in shock. "Do you even know what you're saying?" Gustov whispered. "Attacking another province?"

"This sort of thing hasn't been done in centuries," Radu said slowly. "The political fallout would be explosive!"

Subaru looked at them in disbelief. "Sanshi literally *just* attacked you. They started this war. How is this any different?"

"Because Siros is still considered the outsider," Anri explained sadly. "The law... doesn't protect us as much."

Radu nodded. "The Church isn't exactly our friend, Master Subaru. They worked hard to keep the other Houses *at* our throats for centuries. And once Holy King Gillecomgain became sick, they immediately decided to ignore a civil war on our doorstep. At least so long as they thought we were going to lose. The Hierocracy immediately sent us a letter when the Sanshi army retreated."

"What letter?" Anri asked.

Gustov sighed. "After the Sanshi army fell back, the Hierocracy pulled itself together long enough to send us a sternly worded letter against trying to attack Sanshi. The provinces are forbidden to war against each other and the Church threatened that they would excommunicate us again if we broke the law by entering Sanshi territory."

"*What?!*" Anri exclaimed.

Subaru gave a bark of a laugh. "Wow! The Church really is your enemy! They are solid partisans of Sanshi! Either the law applies to everyone or there's no point to it," Subaru said. "And why are you worried about how a group of people who consider you subhuman feel about your actions anyway?!"

"We're not worried about their feelings!" Anri argued. "Conquering Sanshi or even a part of it would disrupt the balance of power in the kingdom! Even ignoring the Hierocracy, the other houses won't stand for me possessing that much power, Subaru! They already hate us! They might even attack us if they see us getting that powerful!"

"They might," Subaru admitted. "But Sanshi absolutely will attack you again if you don't take immediate action. And I doubt I'll be able to outsmart them again. The church and the other provinces might turn on you but you still need to survive long enough to worry about it."

The room was silent.

Anri took a deep breath. "Uncle, *is* the army ready to march?"

Radu nodded. "We're well supplied for a campaign thanks to Master Subaru's smugglers," He admitted. "If we're truly considering this..."

"Then I suppose march we must," Anri said. "Unless anyone has any other suggestions?"

Radu and Gustov shared a worried look but they didn't say anything.

"While we're on the topic," Subaru added. "I think I'll take my payment now. Where is the Ebony Stone?"

"The what?" Gustov asked.

Anri pursed her lips. "Griest has it."

Subaru scowled at her. He didn't answer right away. "Really. How convenient."

"I'm telling you the truth," Anri said loftily. "The stone is one of their treasures from the Old Kingdom."

"Wait," Gustov broke in. "You mean the *Witch Stone*? What business could you possibly have with that?!"

"That's my business," Subaru grumbled. He glowered at Anri. "Well. It seems I still have a vested interest in your little war then," He said sarcastically.

"We are certain that you'll be of inestimable value to our plans," She said, just as coldly.

"I help you bring Griest to heel and you give me the stone?" Subaru grumbled.

"We find this proposal to be agreeable," Anri replied in a distant, royal tone.

Subaru snorted and got to his feet.

"Will you be seeking lodgings in our city?" Anri asked distantly.

"No. I'm heading back east. I want to keep Emilia close to where I can make her medicine," Subaru grumbled, picking her up.

Anri watched as Subaru carried Emilia out of the room.

Subaru rode in the carriage back to Koi's manor, Emilia still unconscious in his lap.

He sensed Meili's pets not far off but they never got close.

It was lunch time when Subaru returned to Koi's manor. He climbed out of the carriage with Emilia in his arms and he found Senko waiting for him outside.

Elsa and Meili emerged from the nearby forest as casually as if they'd just been on a stroll.

"Greetings, Master," Senko said with a respectful bow. During the meeting last night, Subaru had agreed to allow Koi to tell Senko his identity. "The guest house has been prepared for your residence. If you'll follow me."

Senko led them across the grounds to the guest house which was a large two story cottage on the outskirts of Koi's land. Subaru carried Emilia into the house where the maids were just putting the finishing touches on a few things, preparing the guest house for occupants.

A tiny stable stood nearby and Subaru saw Patrasche's head sticking out a window. It appeared that Patrasche had already been tended to by a worker.

"The house has five bedrooms," Senko explained. "So you should have plenty of space. Err, if you wish to sleep separately," She added awkwardly as Elsa and Meili followed her inside.

Subaru sighed.

"That's OK," Meili said to Senko, completely missing Senko's implication. "Big Sis and I usually prefer to sleep together."

Senko blinked, clearly having no idea how to respond to this.

"The lab equipment?" Subaru asked, stepping aside as the maids left with a few curious glances at their new guests.

"Already arrived and in the cellar, Master," Senko said. "Mother took great pains to ensure that it was well stocked with the provisions you requested."

"Wonderful," Subaru said. "Give your Mother my gratitude and tell her I'll express it fully once I've had time to settle in."

Senko bowed her head. "I'll send a maid out soon to inquire about the noontime meal," She said and quietly slipped out of the house, closing the door behind her.

"Now what do we do?" Meili asked.

Subaru sighed. "Let's put Emilia in bed first. My arms are getting tired."

Subaru carried Emilia up the large stairway. The second floor had a large sitting room, a large bathroom, and at least four good sized bedrooms. Subaru located the master bedroom and laid Emilia in a large canopy bed.

Subaru tucked her in and then stood up, rubbing his sore arms.

"Alright. Let's check out the lab and then I'll give you some details about what I learned in Siros. Let's see if we can find the way down into the basement. Also, you girls should feel free to start picking out your rooms."

Meili's eyes widened. "You mean, we get to stay with *you*?!" She said in a song of delight.

Subaru flushed. "Well... yeah? Why wouldn't you? I mean, unless you'd rather have your own place, which is completely fine by the way. I *will* find you a house of your own if you want one."

"So you're not going to kill me immediately?" Elsa asked calmly as they descended the stairs. They fanned out all over the first floor and searched for the entrance to the basement.

Subaru snorted. "Why would I kill you? ...Aside from all the obvious reasons?" He added in a grumble as he opened doors in the hall looking for the stairs.

"I found the basement. Over here, Master," Elsa called.

Meili and Subaru joined her in the kitchen where Elsa had found a door that led down.

They descended the stairs. "I just assumed," Elsa continued in a completely calm voice. "That once you got the Princess back to Siros you wouldn't have any more use for me."

Subaru let out a hiss of air. "Look. I don't *like* you, Elsa. You tried to kill me. You tried to kill my friends. I would be completely within my rights to despise you."

"I'd agree," Elsa said calmly.

"But," Subaru grated. "You've worked for me. You've done good work for me. It would be... *ungracious* to kill you after that. So I'll let it go. Just remember that if you try to hurt or kill anyone I care about, we'll pick up right where we left off and I'll make you wish that it was Capella who got you."

Elsa didn't answer right away. "That sounds... fair," She said, sounding genuinely surprised.

Subaru scratched his chin, "Honestly," He said in a more composed tone. "I always assumed you guys would want to go your own way after all this was over."

"No! We want to stay with you!" Meili said, her eyes shining.

Elsa chuckled. "I have to agree with Meili, Subaru. You're far and away the best employer we've ever had. Much better than Mother ever was or any of our temporary clients. You even seem to care if we survive the mission."

"Who doesn't care if their... assets survive a mission?! That's just stupid!" Subaru replied.

"I think that Mother kind of enjoyed watching us die to be honest," Meili said reflectively. "If we suffered and died trying to do things for her, she thought that proved we loved her more than we feared death and pain."

Subaru shuddered. "You know, the more I hear about this bitch, the more I like her!"

Meili shrugged.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Putting Capella aside for a moment, I still don't get it. I thought you guys would want to get away from me as soon as you could. Maybe disappear somewhere and have a normal life?"

"Normal is boring," Meili said matter-of-fact. "Normal is like being in Arlem."

"You didn't like Arlem?" Subaru asked.

Meili shrugged. "It was OK. It got annoying to have to pretend to be like everyone else and that nobody has a pet Guiltylowe."

"That is a pretty rare thing," Subaru admitted.

"The truth, Subaru, is that getting very far away from you... would be very unwise," Elsa murmured. "Mother will not forgive our betrayal."

Subaru frowned. "So if you guys left me..."

"Mother would certainly come for revenge," Elsa said matter-of-fact. "She's likely holding back now because she doesn't feel she can face you but once she thinks you won't care about her killing us..." Elsa trailed off.

Subaru pinched the bridge of his nose. *It happened. I'm worried about Elsa. I'm worried that Elsa might be killed in horrible ways despite her spending an entire lifetime killing people in horrible ways.*

It sounds better to say that I'm just worried about Meili but let's face it, she's basically just travel-sized Elsa at this point.

That said... they did do good work for me. That means... I'm responsible for them. I can't just throw them away to die.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Alright," Subaru said slowly. "I can probably find a way to make this work. So I guess you guys should pick out your rooms. At least for the moment. We can talk about

getting you your own place later if you want."

Meili's face lit up as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Big Sis," Meili said. "What room do you think we should take?"

"I actually think Subaru meant we could each have one of our own," Elsa murmured with a faint smile.

"Wow," Meili whispered. She hesitated. "Wait a second. Does that mean that we won't be able to sleep together anymore?"

Elsa shrugged. "Up to you, I suppose."

"Hm," Meili said, her face screwed up in concentration. "This is hard..."

Subaru rolled his eyes.

There were several long tables in the cellar laid out with elaborate chemistry equipment which was much higher quality than what Nicholas was working with. He also saw shelves overflowing with supplies.

"Looks like Koi did her job," Elsa said.

"Yeah, it does," Subaru said, quickly setting up the lab.

I won't be able to get the stone for a while and I need more Years to keep Emilia stable so I need to start cooking them. I only have two Years of Vitae left.

"Need a hand?" Meili asked as Elsa sat down on a dusty table and began to knit.

Subaru shook his head. "No, I got it," Subaru sighed, linking flasks together with tubing. "Alright. So, Meili, remember how I said that the war in Siros would be over effortlessly if they weren't completely incompetent?"

"Yeah."

"Bad news. They're completely incompetent."

"Huh?!"

"They just let the Sanshi army walk away. Didn't try to do anything," Subaru sighed.

Meili stared at him in disbelief.

"Yeah, tell me about about," Subaru shook his head.

"Do we care?" Elsa asked calmly.

"Unfortunately, yes," Subaru grumbled. "I only got involved with Anri in the first place because she promised to tell me where I could find a treasure to cure Emilia."

"And?" Elsa asked.

"Griest has it," Subaru grumbled. "She kind of neglected to mention that part upfront..."

Meili looked furious. "Should we go and teach her a lesson?" Meili offered.

"Maybe later. Right now, we still need her," He sighed. "Anyway, so we need to knock Sanshi around and then Anri will give us the gem once Griest is defeated."

"How are we going to do that?" Meili asked. "Use the Goki to eat all their crops?"

"Might work," Subaru admitted. "I'd prefer not to kill hundreds of thousands of people by starvation though. Also, since we're staying here, it would probably behoove me to find

a way to make Koi a few coins while I'm at it. I like to do good things for my allies."

"And for yourself too," Elsa commented.

Subaru frowned. "Excuse me?"

Elsa didn't look up from her knitting. "I didn't mean anything by that. You are now effectively the Boss of the Gusteko Black Silver Coins. The money that they make directly benefits you. Koi and the others know that when they turn a profit, they owe you your dues. If Koi makes money, so do you."

Subaru frowned, mulling that over. *I mean...it's not a bad point. I definitely do need to make some money to finance our lives once we're ready to disappear. Mucking out the stables in Iruk for a silver a day doesn't have much appeal to me. I can make Soma and other potions for Koi and Cynthia to sell. And once Emilia is cured, I'll have Years to sell for serious amounts of gold.*

Then again, once the war ends, I'll quickly run out of years.

Subaru finished setting up the lab to brew *Umbra* and started the burners.

"Elsa, you make a very good point," Subaru admitted.

"Hello?" A voice called from upstairs.

"We're down here!" Subaru called.

A minute later a woman with white hair and a composed expression came down the cellar stairs. She seemed only slightly older than Elsa and she wore a maid costume. She looked at Subaru's laboratory but asked no questions. "My name is Niobe. I'm one of Lady Koi's maids. I wanted to ask if you would care for lunch. The chef is making finger sandwiches if that would satisfy you."

"*Finger* sandwiches?!" Meili said in horror.

Subaru snorted. "That'll be fine," He replied. "Also, we have a very sick person in the house so please ask the chef to provide some thin broth as well."

Niobe bowed and walked back up the stairs without looking back.

Subaru glanced at Elsa who sat there knitting contentedly. "Would you like to explain to Meili what finger sandwiches are or should I?"

"Welcome, Master," Koi purred.

After feeding Emilia and giving her some medicine, Subaru had come to see Koi that night. Once he had entered her sitting room, he dispelled his shadow. Senko knelt on the floor, pouring tea.

Koi took a sip of tea. "I have yet to discover any trace of Lord Roswaal or your spirits but my people remain in the hunt."

A wave of misery swept over Subaru but he managed to suppress it. He took a teacup from Senko.

"Any word on the *Soma*?" Subaru asked.

Koi smirked. "I'm glad that you asked. Cynthia shared some with her most discerning clientele. They *loved* it. She says she wants as much as you can produce."

"What's her offer?" Subaru asked.

"She wanted me to mention a gold piece for a hundred grams," Koi replied smoothly.

"Acceptable," Subaru said to Koi's clear surprise. *I know I could negotiate a better offer but I don't really need to care about the money right now.*

Once the market is well-established I can consider jacking up the price if money is still something I'm concerned about.

"I'll inform her of your agreement, Master," Koi said with a seated bow. "She'd like more as soon as it can be produced. In the short term, she believes she could sell twenty kilos a day."

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "That's manageable but it will take time. The equipment she gave me is good but it won't scale that high easily."

He picked up a satchel about the size of a gym bag. "In the meantime, take this. It's four kilos of *Soma*."

Koi looked excited as she took the bag. "I'll have your gold delivered sometime tomorrow," She purred.

Subaru thought for a moment. *About forty gold pieces. Good enough. And if I start meeting Cynthia's requested amount that would 200 gold pieces a day. More than we'd ever need.* "In any event, I came here for another reason. Senko," He called her.

Senko looked up at Subaru, startled at being addressed.

"Have you ever given any thought to your future?" He asked.

Koi's eyes widened in horror and then closed in resignation.

I'm so sorry, my precious one, Koi thought to herself in misery. *I deluded myself into thinking that I was powerful enough to protect you from suffering as I did but there's always a bigger fish in the sea. A powerful man will take what he wants. And what a powerful man always wants is a beautiful, submissive girl. This is simply the way that life is for our people.*

Defiance would be unthinkable. Taiyang has the power to take whatever he desires and my resistance will do nothing but get more people killed and subject you to crueler treatment as a means to discipline me...

Still, Taiyang has proved himself not to be sadistic or purposefully cruel and I can be confident that he'll treat you well. You'll be a chattel as were your mother and her mother before you but you won't be tormented or abused. This is better treatment than I often received...

Having concluded that there was nothing to be done. Koi really had only one question in mind: was her beloved daughter about to be made a concubine, a mistress, or a literal sex slave. To kitsune, whose culture had become deeply intertwined with sexual slavery, these positions were considered highly distinctive.

Senko's face was serene but her tail twitched nervously. In spite of her fear, Senko's poise was unshaken.

Koi was so terribly proud of her.

Senko took a deep breath. "Yes, I... suppose that I have," She whispered.

"I'd like you to become a merchant," Subaru said.

Both women stared at him. Neither one had expected this.

"I don't understand," Senko said honestly.

"I need assets who can work in the daylight," Subaru explained. "Your mother is a highly capable smuggler and administrator of the Black Silver Coins-"

Koi bowed her head slightly.

"But there would be... complications if I tried to give her assignments in reputable businesses. Not least of which because of the already considerable demands on her time. I'd like you to be the representative of all my legitimate operations as well as certain business fronts."

Senko's jaw dropped. This had been the last thing she expected.

Koi looked thoughtful, honestly uncertain about how to feel about this offer and what sort of opportunity it would prove to be. Of course, it was *far* preferable to Senko being forced into being Taiyang's mistress.

"I want you both to understand my plans," Subaru said intently. "House Griest has crossed me once too often. Now I am going to reduce them to *ruddle*."

Koi frowned. *I don't doubt that Taiyang can accomplish this but there's no profit in revenge. And it will attract a lot of attention. Not something I'm eager to court.*

Subaru took a deep breath. "All the same," He continued more calmly. "There's no reason why we can't make a profit on this mission."

Koi started to smile. *I really must learn to stop underestimating him.* "How so, Master?" Koi asked.

"I'm preparing a plan to shut down all trade between Sanshi and Lagunica," Subaru continued. "I plan to starve Sanshi of resources and tax revenue. My mabeasts will destroy any trade caravan that crosses the border. Any caravan except for the ones run by Senko," Subaru amended. "Koi, you will continue to smuggle goods over the border. The price for your goods will surge once the border is closed. I also require you to have agents at hand near the Elio forest to work with my servants. When they destroy a caravan, I want your operatives to be there to seize the goods. Take everything profitable and destroy the rest. I'm sure you can sell it somewhere for a nice profit."

"Indeed I can," Koi purred.

Subaru turned his attention back to Senko. "My agents and mabeasts will attack every trade caravan except for yours. The mabeasts shall be kept on the north side of the border so that the Dragon Kingdom will not get involved. And if Sanshi wishes to try removing the mabeast infestation, they'll need to weaken their forces elsewhere. Then my other agents will take advantage of their mistake."

Senko frowned for a long moment. "Master, forgive me, but I'm... uncertain that this will work. Demi-humans are viewed as subhuman in Sanshi. It's very unlikely that any Sanshi merchants will be willing to hire me to transport their goods."

Subaru chuckled. "Your company is going to *primarily* consist of demi-humans. You will claim that being a demi-human is how you're able to get through the gauntlet I create. If anyone becomes curious as to how you're able to make the crossing without falling prey to the mabeasts, you'll claim that your people can cross the border safely at night because of superior demi-human night-vision as well as hearing and smell that allows them to avoid the dangers."

Koi laughed. "That will drive the people in Sanshi crazy!"

Subaru nodded. "Once the merchants in Sanshi and Lagunica realize that Senko's service is the only one that can safely and reliably cross the border, she may charge whatever she wishes to make her deliveries. You shall both make a great deal of money. More importantly, Senko, you making substantial profits here will serve to explain your financing for bigger legitimate projects later. That way, we won't need to launder your assets," Subaru explained.

"I'm still not sure that the merchants will hire me," Senko admitted.

"Give them time," Subaru said. "Start by offering your services in Ganaks. They should be more approachable and you can demonstrate your abilities. When the Sanshi merchants discover that none of their goods can get through the border, you'll tempt them by making them an offer with a guarantee: Their cargo makes it through or you give them double their money back."

Senko's eyes widened. "That could be a lot of money, Master."

"That's why they'll take the bait. They'll think that you are offering them free money because there's no way you should be able to get through. But the mabeasts won't attack your shipments and we'll have Elsa watch your caravans just in case the merchant tries to sabotage the delivery themselves. That is our plan. The border shall be sealed for any wagons. Prices in Sanshi will skyrocket and you shall both make a fortune shipping necessary goods. Then you will give me my due."

"When will the border close?" Koi asked, already pondering how best to take advantage of all this.

"In about three days," Subaru shrugged. "Also, Koi, do you have assets in the Sanshi capitol?"

"My people own the 'Inn-Between,'" Koi answered. "We use it as a center for distributing goods in Sanshi."

Subaru gave her a sickly look. "The 'Inn-Between?'"

Koi shrugged. "The name long preceded my purchase. I considered changing it but decided it was a poor idea. Name recognition and all that."

Subaru shook his head. "Tomorrow morning, I'll need some of your people to ship a pile of kegs there for my use."

Koi nodded. "Consider it done."

Subaru hesitated. "Also, you recall my gift of Years to you before?"

Koi's face brightened. "I do, Master," Koi purred.

Subaru reached into his robe and pulled out three small bottles of glowing blue liquid. *I made almost two months after killing the folks at Nicholas's house and then killing Grist's guards. I can afford to splurge a little to keep my minions happy.*

He handed one to Senko and two to Koi. "One is for Cynthia," Subaru clarified.

Koi looked only slightly disappointed by this. "Thank you, master," She almost cooed. Koi opened the bottle and quickly drank the potion.

Senko watched in shock as the years seemed to melt off Koi's face. Her mother had never lost her beauty but the potion's marks on her face were unmistakable. Her skin was now visibly smoother and her hair more lustrous. The way that Senko remembered Koi looking in her youth.

Koi could almost have been Senko's older sister.

Senko stared down at the vial in disbelief, wondering what she held in her hands.

"I will have more of these in the near future to reward my faithful. You might also start to investigate potential buyers who would be interested in competing for my favor..."

Subaru returned to the cottage and came upstairs where he found Elsa and Meili chatting in the sitting room.

"Subaru, this is a great house!" Meili said excitedly.

"Glad you like it," He replied, sitting down in a chair.

"Subaru," Meili said. "Is there any way that we could make the bunk-beds downstairs bigger?"

"Bunk beds?"

"Yeah. I kind of wanted to still share a room with Big Sis. We were debating sharing the room with the wide bed or the bunk-beds. I was thinking that the bunk-beds might be fun but they're too small for Big Sis."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Maybe just... use the wide bed for now, Meili. We'll look into remodeling later."

Meili nodded sagely.

Subaru took a deep breath and thought for a minute. "OK. Let's go over the plan now. First of all, I wanted to give you guys these," Subaru handed them each a small bottle of *Vitae*.

Elsa took it eagerly while Meili looked more confused.

"Subaru, what is this?" Meili asked.

"Life," Subaru said laconically. "Years stolen from the dead."

Meili frowned. She glanced at Elsa who had already drained her bottle and was sucking out the last few drops.

Meili watched as a small scar on Elsa's arm where a curse-doll mark had been carved, faded away like a shadow.

Elsa closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair with a moan of pleasure.

Meili looked conflicted. "So... I drink this?"

"Master," Elsa murmured. "Isn't Meili too young for this?"

Subaru sighed. "Elsa, don't you start with that."

"No," Elsa said. "I mean... she's already very young. Do we really want her to get younger?"

"A Year doesn't make you younger, Elsa," Subaru clarified. "It just adds life-force. Life force can restore youth, heal wounds, or delay aging. Under normal circumstances it can't make someone who's already young and healthy even younger. Or delay their maturation. But it can form a kind of armor."

"Armor?" Meili asked.

Subaru nodded. "Remember when I spilled that vial on Elsa to heal her wound? Well, if she'd drank the vial before she was injured, the wounds would have mended automatically because her life-force was potent enough to heal them all at once. Absorbing extra Years can armor you against injuries and death because it makes you much harder to heal."

That was all Meili needed to hear. She took out the cork and downed the potion.

Meili's eyes widened and she felt back in her chair. "That feels so good..." She murmured with a sleepy grin. "Can I have some more?"

Subaru chuckled. "Sorry. The stuff is precious until I get that treasure from Griest. Then maybe I can make more."

Meili gave a faint moan of protest but it didn't last long. Meili seemed to be feeling too good to protest anything at the moment.

Subaru shook his head ruefully. "Alright. Well, if you two can focus for a minute now, we should discuss the plan."

Elsa stretched and obligingly sat up, giving Subaru her full attention.

Meili had a silly grin on her face and looked like she was poised to take a nap.

Subaru chuckled. "Elsa?"

Elsa leaned over Meili and started to tickle her belly.

Meili shrieked with laughter, folding in her on herself and gasping for breath.

"Alright! Alright!" Meili laughed. "I'm awake! I'm paying attention!"

Elsa sat there, looking rather pleased with herself. Meili slowly pulled herself upright with a sleepy grin.

Subaru shook his head. "You know, if someone pitched me a sitcom about a psychotic serial killer, a little girl who can control monsters, and a witch who's moonlighting as a drug lord, I'd tune in!"

Elsa frowned. "What's a sitcom?"

"Don't worry about it," Subaru sighed. "Alright, so here's the plan. Meili, how do you feel about working on your own for a few days?"

Meili shrugged and stretched. "I've done that before, lots of times."

"What is she going to be doing?" Elsa asked with more concern.

Subaru sighed. "Alright. So Anri is going to be marching her army down the mountains from Siros to Kocytos. I don't want anyone to know that they're coming so I'm sending you to go ahead of her. I want you to use some of your pets to comb the woods and kill any Griest scouts and spies you come across. It should be very safe. Spies and scouts usually don't gather in big groups."

Meili shrugged. "Sounds easy. My Knickerbockers will find them and my Guiltylowe will eat them."

Subaru looked closely at Elsa. She mulled this over and finally nodded.

Did I really just double-check to see if a psychotic killer thinks I'm exposing Meili to too much risk?

"What am I doing?" Elsa asked.

"You and I are going to head to Sanshi and convince the townspeople that they've been cursed."

"Huh?" Elsa asked.

Subaru shrugged. "I'll give you the details later. After that, you and I will take the rest of the mabeasts south and close the border between Lagunica and Sanshi."

Elsa frowned. "Can we do that? That's a lot of territory to control."

Subaru shook his head. "Actually, it's not that much territory. The route into Sanshi has the Elio Forest to the west and the Gina Mountains to the east. It's a small area called 'the Gap.' It's also called a variety of more vulgar names," Subaru admitted. "Closing the border will put tons of pressure on Sanshi. Between the closed trade routes and Anri marching south, Sanshi will be put in a vice and it'll crumble."

Meili put her hand up.

Subaru raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Meili?"

"Will I be back before the *real* battles in this war start?" She asked.

Subaru frowned. "I... think so, why?"

"I want to learn more about how to fight battles!" Meili said excitedly.

Elsa looked aghast. "Subaru! You are being a terrible influence on my sister!" She scolded.

Subaru face-palmed. "I'm a terrible influence?! What about you, you... Alright, stop. We are not going any further into this... whatever it is. Meili, tomorrow you'll take half the mabeasts and head north. Make sure you make contact with Anri when you get there so she knows what you're doing. I don't want her army distracted by rumors of mabeasts in the woods."

"Is that going to be dangerous?" Elsa murmured.

Subaru shook his head. "Anri isn't dumb enough to cross me by hurting Meili," He said with confidence. "What I've done to Sanshi could be done to Siros just as easily. Anyway, I asked Koi to send you north with a tent and food but Anri can help keep you supplied while you're heading back. You'll be pacing the army on the way down the mountain so it will probably take you a couple of days."

Meili nodded. "If we're splitting up the mabeasts then what mabeasts go where?"

Subaru frowned at her. "Good question." He waited.

Meili took a deep breath. It had been a sincere question, she hadn't been volunteering for a pop quiz. "Well... I'm going to be hunting for things... So the Knickerbockers and the wolgarms should come with me... You're planning to set ambushes and fight guarded caravans so you should take the Guiltylowe... but I should take a Guiltylowe or two as well just in case I run into trouble?" She asked in an uncertain voice.

Subaru nodded. "Very good."

Meili relaxed. "What about the Goki?"

"I'll take them. They'll help me plant my curse."

"So we're all leaving tomorrow morning?" Elsa asked.

"Meili is. We'll probably head out tomorrow afternoon. We need to wait for something to reach Sanshi before we take action."

Subaru had finished feeding Emilia her broth. Elsa and Meili had gone to bed.

All that was left to do today was to give Emilia her medicine.

Subaru carefully pulled Emilia upright and gave her tiny sips of the *Vitae*.

Emilia let out a ponderous sigh. "Su... Subaru?" She croaked.

"Mili!" Subaru gasped. "Are you OK?!"

"Where... I can't see you..." Emilia sounded barely awake.

"Your eyes are... hurting, Mili," Subaru said evasively. "But we're both here together. We're someplace safe and comfortable and I can make you strong medicine every day."

"Safe?" Emilia coughed. She shook her head. "Subaru. We'll *never* be safe."

Subaru frowned in concern.

"Mili," Subaru began slowly. "I..."

But Emilia had already fallen asleep.

The next morning, Meili headed north with two Guiltylowe and all of the wolgarm and Knickerbockers.

Subaru had seen her off after breakfast. He'd ensured that she'd been given a tent and ample supplies but Subaru admitted he was concerned when Meili admitted she'd never set up a tent in her life. Still, there was nothing to do about that right now.

Koi's smuggler showed up around lunchtime to pick up the kegs and Subaru met him at the door. He met him in his natural form to avoid certain problems.

Subaru watched Koi's factor, a hulking man with a shaved head, climb out of his wagon and his similarly large assistants followed him.

"Who are you?" The man asked bluntly.

Subaru shrugged. "I'm Lucas. I'm here to give you your stuff for Koi."

"I'm Toby," The factor said. He looked distinctly disappointed. "Where is she?"

"She?" Subaru asked in confusion.

"You know! The psycho with the enormous tits!" Toby said, miming a pair of watermelons attached to his chest.

Subaru glowered at the man. "Elsa? It's for you." He called over his shoulder.

Elsa emerged into the hall from a nearby room. Her expression was languorous. "Who is it?" She murmured.

Subaru heard Toby inhale sharply.

I'll never understand how a smile from a beautiful woman can look so terrifying when it's Elsa doing it...

"This guy wanted to talk to you," Subaru said calmly. "He says-"

"Oh!" Toby clapped his rough and dirty hand over Subaru's mouth. "We don't need to get into any of that! We're just here to ship goods! That's all!"

Subaru gave Elsa an exaggerated shrug.

Elsa smirked and then walked back into the other room.

Toby heaved a sigh of relief. He slowly removed his hand from Subaru's mouth.

Toby shot Subaru an angry look and Subaru looked just as annoyed.

"You want to get the goods now?" Subaru mocked. "Or should I let you talk to Elsa some more?"

Shortly after that, Toby had loaded ten small kegs from the cellar into his wagon.

I feel horrible leaving like this... Emilia woke up last night. She might wake up again. But Anri is already marching her army. I can't delay getting this ball rolling.

This sucks...

"Alright, is that everything? Are we all ready to go?" Toby asked impatiently.

"Almost," Subaru answered. "Are you ready?" Subaru asked Elsa as she emerged from the cottage.

"I'm all set," Elsa said pleasantly.

"You're also taking *her*," Subaru said to the now terrified Toby. "I'd be on my best behavior if I were you."

Toby's face turned ashen.

Subaru looked back at Elsa. "I'll see you tomorrow morning. I still need to instruct the maids in how to care for Emilia while I'm gone. Try to get everything wrapped up tonight if you can but don't take any big risks. We don't have an exacting timetable."

Elsa simpered at Subaru and then approached the wagon with a warm smile. As she passed Subaru, she hesitated a moment and whispered something into his ear.

Subaru thought about it for a moment then shrugged. "As long as the goods get where they need to go, I don't really care."

Elsa's gave Toby a warm smile that made the smuggler swallow hard. "I can already tell that we're going to have a lot of fun on this trip," She cooed.

That night in Sanshi, Elsa hid in the shadows of a narrow alley with a small keg in her arms. She stood near what was normally a busy intersection but the area was completely deserted this late at night except for a lazy guard helping himself to a drink from one of the town wells.

This keg was her last one and Elsa really wanted to be finished. She watched with irritation as she waited for the guard to vacate the premises. She'd been waiting on the lazy guard to move for quite some time. Her hands were itching to rip open his belly but Subaru's instructions had been very clear. *Don't kill anyone unnecessarily. Don't let anyone know you were in town.*

Thus, Elsa was reduced to hiding in the shadows with her tiny keg and fantasizing about how the guard's entrails would feel sliding between her fingers.

Finally, after an interminable amount of time, the soldier got to his feet and shambled off through the dark, empty streets.

Elsa rolled her eyes and waited. She stood concealed for several minutes just to be safe.

When she was certain that he wasn't coming back, Elsa took one of her knives and stabbed the keg as if she was trying to crack a walnut.

The wood broke and inside was a thick, tarry black goo that smelled terrible.

Elsa walked calmly through the deserted intersection and as she passed the well, Elsa tossed the keg inside. It hit the water with a soft splash and sank to the bottom.

Elsa kept walking, humming a soft tune to herself.

That was the last well. Now I just need to wait for Master Subaru.

The next morning, when the sun came up, the gates to Sanshi opened and Subaru walked into town.

He headed to the center of Sanshi where he'd been told the Inn-Between was located.

The Inn-Between was a dive. Even if Subaru hadn't been flat-out told that the place was a front for Koi's operations, he could have still guessed. The place looked like an inn and tavern had been built *around* a warehouse. This was likely exactly what had happened. Koi wasn't working too hard to conceal her influence here.

Subaru found Elsa seated on a loading dock and knitting a moppet, her legs dangling in the air. Nearby, a group of tough-looking guys were rapidly filling a wagon that had backed up against the loading dock, emptying the warehouse and tossing goods into the wagon.

Subaru climbed up onto the loading dock and sat down beside Elsa.

"Any trouble?" He asked.

Elsa shook her head. "All of the wells have been spiked. We actually have some extra kegs left over. There were only seven wells in the city except for the ones inside the castle grounds and I didn't try to get those."

"Good thinking," Subaru agreed. "How was the trip down here?"

"Oh. It was fun."

"Any survivors?" Subaru sighed.

"Everyone survived. Even Toby, although he did get some new scars."

Subaru raised an eyebrow.

Elsa shrugged, focusing on her knitting. "Toby mistook my friendly nature for an offer of a more... intimate friendship. I had to correct him."

Subaru chuckled. "Good girl," He said seriously. "Did you want me to have a word with him?"

Elsa looked surprised. "Thank you but I think he got the message. Why are you asking about them anyway? I thought you said you didn't care if they died."

"I don't care," Subaru admitted. He sighed. "I'm just wondering when I stopped caring..."

Elsa frowned in sympathy at Subaru and put her knitting down. "If it makes you feel any better, Master, I don't feel as strong an urge to kill as I used to. I still like to get my hands on entrails but the need isn't as powerful. Ever since you started giving me that *Vitae* I feel more... normal."

Subaru sighed. "Well, that's encouraging, I guess. Do you usually have to fend off people who um, get the wrong idea about you?"

"It's fairly common," Elsa admitted. "Dressing this way is an excellent distraction but it does have drawbacks. I'm just lucky that I never needed to use my body for a job."

"What do you mean?"

"Mother would often order her children to 'entertain' targets, either to get them to lower their guard before killing them or just to get leverage over them for later extortion. For a time, Mother planned to have me trained that way as well but she discovered that I was an unnaturally effective corpse-doll and so she used me for that instead," Elsa said matter-of-fact. "So, I was lucky in a way."

Subaru looked ill then he shook the thoughts off. "Anyway, did you find a good place to do this?"

Elsa pointed up at a towering spire in the center of town that was connected to the battlements by a stout stone wall. "That's the lookout watchtower," Elsa said. "If you go up there, everyone in the town center will be able to see and hear you."

Subaru studied it for a moment. "Looks good," He said. "Exit strategy?"

Elsa pointed off to the south. "There's a crane doing some construction work on the outer wall. You can finish up your performance, rush to the southern battlements, and then use the crane's rope to jump off the wall before anyone reaches you."

Subaru nodded. "Nice work, Elsa. I'm impressed."

Elsa grinned at him. "Well, we all have our talents."

"What are they doing?" Subaru asked, pointing at the men loading the wagon.

"Apparently, Koi told them to evacuate for the time being," Elsa said. "She doesn't want her people at ground zero when this happens."

"Smart woman," Subaru murmured.

"When do you want to start?" Elsa asked.

"Midmorning," Subaru said after a moment's thought. "I want the market to be full when we spring this for maximum effect."

"Is there anything you need me to do?"

Subaru rubbed his chin. "I left Patrasche in the forest just north of here along with the mabeasts. If you want, you can bring her to the southern wall so we can mount up and get out of here quickly after I make my escape."

"I can do that," Elsa said. "How's she handling being alone with the mabeasts?"

"Surprisingly well," Subaru replied. "I guess people can get used to anything, given enough time."

That market day began like any other, the city was crowded with wagons and pedestrians pushing and shoving their way through town. The enormous market district of Sanshi, one of the largest in the north, was a bustling melting pot of merchants from all across the world. All human, of course. The district had an unholy cacophony hanging over it with people haggling, arguing, and screaming at one another.

This continued until suddenly, without warning, the day became dark and cold.

The market was dead silent for a moment and then everyone broke into a frightened chatter.

"Look!" One man screamed, pointing up.

A few people and then more and more looked up and raised their voices in dismay. High above, perched on the watchtower like some grotesque gargoyle was a shadow dredged up from a nightmare. "Behold, Taiyang the Witch of the Frozen Wastes," The figure proclaimed in a voice that could have belonged to no living thing. "Your leaders dared to lay hands on my bride and they stole from me my great treasure. Thus, upon this miserable city, I place a curse."

The crowd gasped in panic. The guards were already moving out from the palace but they had a long way to go before they even reached Taiyang must less could confront him.

"On your heads," The witch declared in an inhuman voice. "My thought will lay like a lead chain around your necks, dragging you to the ground. Your city will waste away,

covered in swill and flies. Not even the rats will eat your dead. You will kneel before your greatest enemy, cursing both life and death."

The crowd stared up in horror and they became aware of a loud buzzing. The people recoiled as the sky above them grew dark with swarms of buzzing insects.

Enough Goki to block out the sun descended on the town.

The crowd screamed in panic and they began to stampede away in all directions. Everyone raced away, desperately seeking shelter from the swarm.

The swarm lighted on the market, gnawing at any food present and taking nips out of any persons who hadn't found shelter.

Pandemonium reigned in the city for long minutes and then, the Goki simply flew up and over the wall and disappeared.

When the town residents looked back up at the tower, Taiyang had vanished into thin air.

That afternoon, Patrasche rode into the Gap, not far from the northeastern tip of the Elior Forest and not far from Koi's estate.

Subaru and Elsa rode on Patrasche and they were followed by a large pack of mabeasts.

"You know you almost made it, Master," Elsa said consolingly, she held onto Subaru as they rode on the riding dragon.

"Be quiet, Elsa," Subaru grumbled.

"You were literally *this* close to landing in the saddle. It would have been awesome. You just overcompensated a little and wound up falling into the moat."

Subaru sighed. "Are you enjoying this?" He muttered.

"Surprisingly, yes!" Elsa laughed. "I can't remember the last time I laughed! Like... *really* laughed! Not just laughed because it was the correct thing to do in that moment. I actually feel emotions again! I'm not just pretending to have them!"

Subaru shook his head. "Capella really did a number on you guys, didn't she?" He sighed.

"Yes. But let's talk about something happier. So, what do we do now?"

"We look for Koi's men. They're supposed to be here. We'll sync up with them and they can help us keep watch for trade caravans."

"And they're taking the goods off to sell somewhere?"

"Yeah," Subaru said. He thought for a moment. "Also, just for the record, you and Meili are going to receive a piece of this."

"A piece of what?"

"Whatever money I make from Koi, you and Meili will get a share," Subaru said. "You're working for me. You're going to be paid in gold. And paid in Years when I have them to spare."

Elsa's arms around Subaru suddenly felt a lot warmer, more like a hug. "Master Subaru, I'm so happy that Meili and I found you. Living with Mother wasn't really living. Now that we're with you, we're really happy for the first time ever," She whispered in a thick voice. "I'm so sorry that we ever tried to hurt you..."

"Uh," Subaru muttered uncomfortably. He could feel Elsa's breath on the back of his neck and her breasts pushing into his back. "That's... alright, Elsa. We're cool now, right?"

Elsa didn't answer except to squeeze him tighter.

Subaru swallowed hard. "Oh, look! I think those are Koi's guys. You want to take point, Elsa? You can give them directions and I'll hang back. That way I don't need to shroud myself to talk to them."

Subaru and Elsa spent the rest of the afternoon standing guard over the Gap. Every time a trade caravan tried to come through, Subaru in full Taiyang-guise would attack, supported by Elsa and the mabeasts.

Subaru ordered the mabeasts to attack the earth dragons first to prevent the wagons from escaping. After that, each wagon driver had a straight choice: run or die.

Most choose to run but Subaru and Elsa still killed plenty of armed guards and mercenaries who'd been hired to protect the caravans.

Koi's people were on hand to gather up the goods and take them away.

Subaru and Koi had made a campfire and were about to have some trail rations when a few of Koi's servants appeared. Senko had apparently thought to send them a packed dinner and a note describing Emilia's condition.

Smart girl, Subaru thought, reading the note. *I knew it was a good idea to give her some more responsibility*. Emilia's condition had remained unchanged. Despite Niobe watching her all day, she had yet to open her eyes.

I don't know if I should feel disappointed or relieved...

I could only imagine how she'd freak out if she woke up, blind, crippled, and helpless. She'd be terrified and I wouldn't be there to help her...

Subaru and Elsa struggled a bit but they managed to pitch the tent. Elsa told Koi's men to keep watch while they got some sleep and then Subaru and Elsa climbed into the tent and laid down.

Subaru woke up in the middle of the night to discover that Elsa had shifted position. She was now wrapping herself around Subaru and her breasts were pressed into his back.

Subaru swallowed hard. "Um. Elsa?"

"Master Subaru," She whispered. "You're... going to keep Meili and me, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Subaru said, wondering what the hell was going on. "We already talked about that, right? You guys can stay with me for as long as you want."

Not sure how we're going to make this work but I can't just... cut them loose. For one thing, Capella would kill them and it would be my fault. Even ignoring that, if I sent them away not only would they be a huge liability but they might just decide to get revenge by tipping off Capella to my location.

"I feel like you're still undecided about it," Elsa murmured, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Subaru got the uncomfortable impression that the breasts pressing against his back no longer had anything covering them. "No, I'm decided. *It's* decided. We're good," Subaru said awkwardly, trying to move slightly away.

Elsa wouldn't let him. "I want you to know... I've never done anything like this before..."

Subaru swallowed hard. "Anything like what?" Subaru said, his voice slightly shrill. "We... we aren't doing anything!"

"Not yet but..."

"Elsa, I'm married," Subaru said flatly.

"Oh, that's OK! I don't want to come between the two of you, Master Subaru. You can have Emilia as much as you want," She assured him.

Subaru bit his lip. "Thanks for... understanding," He said in a weak voice.

"I know this isn't the right time," She whispered directly into his ear. "But I want you to know, I'll be more than happy to make you feel good anytime you want."

Subaru swallowed hard. "Yeah. Thanks, Elsa. I, um... I really appreciate that. I mean, you're a beautiful woman-"

"You really think so?" Elsa cooed.

Subaru hesitated, wondering if he'd made a mistake. "Well, yeah. Obviously. But like you said, it's... really not the right time for this so we should probably just try to get some sleep."

"Good idea," Elsa said, snuggling tightly against his back and went to sleep.

Subaru sighed, sensing that he wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight.

For the next three days, Subaru and Elsa guarded the Gap. Word of the Witch and his mabeasts spread quickly on both sides of the border and traffic between the regions almost ceased.

Small military units from Sanshi attempted to sweep the area and drive back the mabeasts but Subaru and Elsa had no trouble ambushing them and slaughtering them.

Senko's people passed through several times and they were always ignored by the mabeasts. The first few times, Subaru asked Elsa to aid him in keeping watch over Senko's caravans. He was glad he did so. They were frequently attacked by agents of merchants eager to take advantage of Senko's 'double your money back' offer. Elsa was more than a match for these common roughnecks. She would slaughter the thugs and Subaru would gobble up what was left of their lives.

Then Elsa would bring their leader to Senko as a prisoner. This allowed Senko to deliver the cargo to her customer and delicately inform him that she had a large amount of leverage over him in the form of causing him to be arrested for fraud if he failed to show her some consideration...

Subaru and Elsa were now all but living on *Soma*. A potent stimulant, *Soma* allowed the imbibers to go for days without sleep. Subaru and Elsa were very busy and more waking hours were definitely useful but more than anything else, Subaru was trying to avoid sleep.

Each night, Elsa's invitations and blandishments became more blatant. Subaru was exhausted and under a fantastic amount of stress. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to just close his eyes and relax without worrying about Emilia, the spirits, or the fate of whole kingdoms. The offer to just close his eyes and forget about the world in a pair of soft arms was beyond enticing and only his love and loyalty to Emilia allowed him to silence that nagging little voice in his mind that assured him, 'she would never know.'

Subaru waited with baited breath for Meili to return and distract Elsa.

Will that distract Elsa? Or will I just have a twelve year old wanting to join in on the fun?

That afternoon, Malcolm and Griest stood on the palace parapet. He still hadn't recovered from whatever the witch Taiyang had done to him. Malcolm found himself forced to walk with a cane. The healers explained to Malcolm that the strength and mana had simply been sucked out of him. They had never seen this kind of effect before and weren't entirely sure how to treat it. Their best suggestions were for physical therapy and moderate exercise to rebuild strength.

"Father," Deann called. Malcolm turned around and saw Deann walking across the parapet. Deann was slightly better off than Malcolm. Either because she was younger or because Taiyang had drained her less, Deann was still able to walk around unassisted, albeit slowly.

"Yes, daughter?" Malcolm grumbled, wishing he could keep the hand gripping his cane from trembling with fatigue.

Deann had been a skilled and powerful warrior. Now she had to make every step slowly and deliberately, leaning on the battlements as she went and it was clear that this annoyed the hell out of her. She slowly approached Malcolm. "Father. What are we going to do about Taiyang?"

"Do about him?"

"He's clearly aiding Siros," Deann pointed out. "He rescued Princess Kairei and he killed Uncle Robert."

"Not to mention most of our officers stationed in Kocytos," Malcolm grumbled.

"Are we sure he did that?"

"It seems unlikely that it was anyone else with all the havoc he's been causing. Did you learn anything about him while you were a prisoner?"

"Not very much," Deann admitted. "He appears to be obsessed with his wife, the elf. She was all that he talked about. That and what he was going to do to us if she was hurt. Truthfully, when I heard that she had gone blind, I thought we were dead. Will you bring this before the Hierocracy? A witch roaming the countryside and aiding Siros should be enough to get their attention. Especially now that he's killed Gilbert."

Malcolm snorted. "Those fools wouldn't react if you set their frocks on fire!"

"Then what are we going to do?" Deann asked.

Malcolm stroked his chin. "We finish the war. Quickly. Brutally. Once Siros is destroyed, Taiyang can run around causing trouble but he'll be like a blizzard on top of the Sacred mountain: a lot of activity but no effect."

Deann hesitated. "There is one more thing, Father. The curse."

Malcolm gave Deann a shocked look. "Oh, Deann, not you too-"

"The people are talking about it, Father," She clarified. "They're scared."

"Taiyang made a few windy pronouncements and then he ran away in fear!" Malcolm said dismissively. "And this *frightens* them?!"

"But people are getting sick in town," Deann pointed out. "There's some kind of epidemic spreading in the city and people are claiming it's the result of the curse!"

Malcolm opened his mouth to protest.

"I know that we get diseases all the time, Father," Deann cut him off. "It's part of being a trade hub. But the optics right now are very bad. Every time someone new gets sick, the superstitious folks in town whisper about the curse a little bit louder."

Malcolm frowned. "Symptoms? Do we recognize the disease?"

"The healers claim that it resembles cholera. Not a disease that our healers usually have any trouble healing but this strand appears to be stubbornly resistant to magical cures. Every time the healers cure someone, he's sick again a few days later. And by then, more are sick besides. The people are afraid."

Malcolm made a sour expression. "And the palace guards?"

"So far most have resisted infection," Deann replied. "The city guards are also resistant but not as completely. It's probably because they're mixing with more infected people. The healers are suggesting a quarantine."

Malcolm sighed. "I suppose we have little to lose with the mabeasts running wild in the south. Trade has just about choked off anyway so a quarantine will have little impact. Any word from the soldiers we sent to investigate?"

Deann shook her head. "They're four days overdue and the scouts we sent to look for them are now two days overdue."

Malcolm scowled. "Well, we won't send any more then until we can send out patrols in force. I'm not going to feed my men to mabeasts."

"The rumor is that Taiyang is behind it," Deann mentioned.

"According to rumor he's also the puppet master of the four northern provinces and he forces their wives and daughters to serve him in bed every night," Malcolm said sarcastically. "He's apparently the reason for the last four crop failures and why the farm animals have been acting 'funny' recently. I even heard a rumor that he's created a shadow clergy in a secret room beneath the Basilica who are devoted to freeing the Witch of Envy. A witch who is apparently Taiyang's bride."

Deann made a face. "It seems rumors are spreading like wildfire."

Malcolm took a deep breath. "We need to find a way to regain control. If this continues, things will only go from bad to worse."

The next morning, Meili and her pack rode into the camp where Subaru and Elsa waited. To Subaru's surprise, Meili was riding a mottled gray earth-dragon.

"Hey, Subaru," Meili said dismounting. "Anri made it out of the mountains and onto the plains. I'd bet good money that nobody saw her coming before now. I depopulated those woods of spies and scouts. But I can't protect her from spies now that she's marching through the open plains."

"Nice work," Subaru said. "You got some big presents coming up when all this is over."

Meili eyes brightened. "What about a Snow Blight?" She asked eagerly.

Subaru gaped at her. "A *what*?!"

"They're cute!" Meili proclaimed.

Subaru made a face. He glanced at Elsa who was laughing quietly into her hand.

Subaru swallowed hard. "We'll talk," He grumbled. Subaru looked over at the new riding dragon who was inspecting Patrasche with curiosity. Patrasche's expression was dismissive. "Did you get this from Anri?"

Meili looked annoyed. "Yeah. She said she'd prefer it if I stopped riding a Guiltylowe into camp. She said it scared her soldiers," Meili grumbled.

"Could come in handy though," Subaru replied. "Makes it much easier for you to blend in. What do you call her?"

"Oh. We named her 'Tasty,'" Meili said.

Subaru blinked. "Tasty?!" He asked incredulously.

She shrugged. "That was what all the Guiltylowe thought when they first saw her and I guess the name just sort of stuck."

Subaru gave her a sickly grin. "OK. 'Tasty' it is."

"So what now?" Meili asked.

Subaru's face became serious. "Did Anri say how long until she reached Kocytos?"

"A day. Maybe two."

Subaru nodded. "Alright. Then let's head up there to support her. The Gap has been dead for the past two days anyway so we won't lose much by going north even if a few merchants do try to get through. It'll just be a trickle compared to the usual flood."

Subaru whistled for Patrasche who came over quickly. She sniffed the newcomer dragon with clear disdain before letting her master mount.

As Subaru set himself in the saddle he felt his weight shift. Before he realized what was happening, Elsa had climbed into the saddle behind him.

"Big Sis?" Meili asked plaintively. "You're not riding with me?"

"That dragon is yours, Meili," Elsa said very reasonably. "I thought we should let her get used to *your* scent before we introduce her to mine. Otherwise, she might become confused about who her master was."

"Oh," Meili nodded in comprehension. "I get it."

Subaru made a face but decided that nothing would be gained by pointing out the flaws in this 'theory.'

"Alright, let's all head north. Meili, after we pass the capitol, I'd like you to send your Knickerbockers ahead to look for scouts and messengers. I don't want Kocytos to be able to warn the capitol about Anri's army."

Subaru, Elsa, and Meili made camp in the woods near Kocytos that night. Predictably, Kocytos had sent out several messengers which the trio had found along the way. Since they were messengers and not fighters, Elsa had caught them and killed them effortlessly. Subaru only considered this noteworthy due to the fact that he was gathering more lives.

I must be up to almost eighty lives by now... How many Years will that make even without the Stone? Somewhere between eighty and a hundred and sixty?

Late that evening, Subaru returned from speaking with Anri. He entered the camp where Elsa and Meili were resting beside the fire.

Subaru dismounted Patrasche. "I brought food," Subaru announced.

"Combat rations?" Meili asked with distaste. "I think I'd rather send my pets to hunt down a couple of rabbits."

Subaru shook his head and pulled a gourd out of the saddlebag. "I stopped at an inn. It's some kind of mutton stew," He said bringing three gourds over to the fire.

"Oh!" Meili said in appreciation.

"Any more messengers?" Subaru asked as he sat down and handed them their dinner.

"None," Meili said, digging in. "It's weird. I figured they'd be sending out a ton. They know Anri will be here tomorrow."

"You need to remember," Subaru replied, sipping his stew. "That we know that the messengers didn't make it but the people in Kocytos *don't* know that. They sent out almost ten messengers. They're going to assume that at least one of them got through."

Meili laughed. "Bad assumption! Sucks to be them!"

"Right," Subaru chuckled.

"How was Anri?" Meili asked.

Subaru snorted. "Oh, she's always such a delight to deal with. Most of her generals were opposed to my plan for no particular reason. They didn't have an actual objection other than the fact that they're generals and they feel that they shouldn't have to follow anyone else's instructions. Anri put her foot down and we're all set for tomorrow."

Subaru suddenly noticed something. "You only set up the one tent?" He asked in a worried voice.

Meili nodded. "Big Sis figured that it was only the three of us and it gets chilly at night," She said, slurping her soup. "We might as well all sleep together to stay warm."

Elsa nodded with a peaceful smile.

Subaru gave her a sickly grin.

Maybe I can convince Elsa that giving Meili an advanced education tonight would be bad...

Early the next morning, Subaru and the others kept watch over Kocytos. Subaru and mounted on Patrasche and Elsa and Meili sat on Tasty. Subaru had persuaded Meili to ride on Tasty rather than a Guiltylowe so she'd have one more mabeast to fight for her. He'd persuaded Elsa to ride with Meili to better keep the little girl safe during the battle when things could get crazy without warning.

Subaru had been surprised by how easily they both had agreed.

Through the dense bushes, Subaru could see the Sanshi soldiers frantically digging trenches in front of the city. No more messengers had been sent out for some time.

"Why are they doing that?" Meili asked. Since the Goki night raid at Siros, Meili had developed a keen interest in military tactics.

"Doing what?" Subaru whispered.

"Um. Digging trenches outside the city. Why not just go in the city and defend it there?" Meili said.

"There's no city wall. Because of that, Kocytos is harder to defend. Besides, fighting in the streets is extremely complicated compared to fighting in the field. This army has been swollen by the remnants of the army we destroyed up in the mountains with the Goki so it is much bigger than the Siros army but it still hasn't been able to replace most of their junior officers and they won't be able to until the other remnants make

their way back here. That means that they need a simple situation where they can rely on their numbers to bring Siros down without complicated tactics and coordination."

Meili scratched her head, pondering that. Her expression was thoughtful.

Subaru watched approvingly. *This is actually a good sign. Meili's ability to command mabeasts means that the most important skills she could possibly cultivate are the understanding of tactics and learning how to effectively direct assets in a battle. If she keeps learning like this, she'll be the scourge of the continent in ten years,* Subaru thought with a weird kind of rueful pride.

"Here comes the Siros army," Elsa murmured.

The Siros army crept up the road in the distance and onto the broad plain in front of the city. They remained well out of bow range as they formed up in lines.

"It seems silly that the Sanshi forces are just standing there waiting," Meili complained.

Subaru laughed. "It's not silly at all. It's just all that they can do. And it's a sign that our strategy is working."

Meili squinted at him in confusion.

Subaru smirked down at her. "I've learned not to expect much from the generals of Gusteko. But even if they had Sun Tzu commanding the battle, they're going to be hamstrung by their lack of sub-commanders. A general can issue broad orders but he depends on the leaders in the thick of it to interpret those orders and take necessary actions. The general can use trumpets and stuff to order advance and retreat but most of these soldiers are conscripts and peasants. They can't follow complicated instructions without guidance. Right now, all the Sanshi army can do is stand there and wait for Siros to commit."

Meili frowned, mulling that over.

It took a few minutes for the Siros army to finish forming up. Then in lockstep, the soldiers advanced.

"Their army is bigger than 'ours,'" Elsa worried. "A lot bigger."

"Yeah but it won't matter," Subaru assured her.

"Are you going to tell us what we're doing or not?" Meili grumbled.

Subaru smirked. "Just be ready to charge on my signal."

Meili looked extremely discomforted by the thought of actually charging a whole army with her pack of mabeasts.

"What about messengers?" Elsa asked calmly. "If we leave our post here won't more messengers be sent out?"

"Possibly," Subaru replied. "Most likely the city will take time to figure out what's really going on before they can send a report. Hopefully we'll be back in position by then. If not, it really won't matter. Once we defeat this army we'll have taken most of the manpower in the province out of action. Sanshi will barely have enough men to man its capitol walls. Especially with the 'epidemic' going on."

"There's an epidemic in Sanshi?" Meili asked in surprise.

Subaru glanced at her. "Elsa left a present in the city wells," Subaru replied.

"Poison?" Meili guessed.

"Yeah. In these quantities it's unlikely to kill anyone unless they're already extremely weak but it is definitely making the entire city seriously sick."

"What kind of poison is it?" Meili asked.

"Hellebore extract. It's a kind of diuretic," Subaru replied. "Diuretics force water and certain minerals out of the body. People will be going to the bathroom constantly and that will make anyone who drinks the water feel very weak and tired. Hopefully, that means that the people in Sanshi will suspect a plague, not dirty water. I already made the antidote. Elsa will drop it into the wells after they surrender and the plague will clear up in a few days."

"Wow. Where did you come up with that idea?" Meili asked, sounding impressed.

Subaru grinned at her. "There was a famous battle where I come from. They were besieging a city called..." Subaru trailed off as the name eluded him. He made a face and triggered *Reason and Judgment*.

In the frozen moment, Subaru scanned his entire memory for the name of this siege. Only to discover that... it wasn't there.

None of it was here. *Reason and Judgment* allowed him to remember any insignificant detail from his life and his Authority was making it perfectly clear to him that Subaru had never heard of Hellebore before. He had no idea about this mysterious siege or where it was or who had fought it. In fact, it was like trying to remember a dream. The details fled faster the more he tried to recall them.

Subaru restarted time with his expression frozen in shock.

Subaru tried to figure out what was going on but before he could put anything into context, there was a roar from the battlefield as the armies collided. Subaru wrenched his mind back to the present.

"Are we going to charge?" Elsa asked.

Subaru shook his head. "Not yet. Hopefully Anri's commanders know what they're doing and they follow the plan."

"What plan?" Meili asked.

Subaru smirked. "This is an old tactic of master generals: feign retreat."

Meili looked confused.

The armies were engaged and even from far away, Subaru could hear the ringing sounds of clashing metal and the screams of soldiers.

No more than a minute or two after the armies had locked together, Siros blew a trumpet. A long single note that echoed out across the battlefield.

The forces of Siros began to fall back and the Sanshi army aggressively pursued.

A trumpet blew again and the Siros soldiers began to run but it wasn't a rout. They stayed close together as they ran back toward supply wagons and commanders.

Subaru watched with a smile as the Sanshi army streamed across the field in chase, leaving its own commanders unprotected.

"Now, we charge. Come on!" Subaru shouted, kicking Patrasche.

Subaru broke through the trees on the black riding dragon and charged across the field, dozens of ravenous mabeasts in his train.

Subaru, Elsa, and Meili had covered less than half the distance to the generals before they were spotted. But it didn't matter.

The Sanshi trumpeter blew a desperate series of notes.

What does that signal mean? Fall back? Reform? Retreat?

It makes no difference. That army has no sergeants or captains to interpret the signal into anything relevant to what's going on. There's no way those soldiers are going to figure out what's happening, much less react in any time to affect anything.

The generals kicked their riding dragons and bolted for the city but Subaru had foreseen this and Elsa, Subaru, and Meili swiftly cut them off.

The officers turned and made for the back ranks of their soldiers but they were cut off by a horde of Guiltylowe there too. The generals were completely surrounded.

"What is this?!" An old man with a mustache demanded in rage.

"You were just about to surrender," Meili explained to him, giggling.

"You're using mabeasts in war?!" The general roared. "I knew that Siros was a disgusting gaggle of sub-humans worthy to be nothing but thralls! But to use witchcraft in battle?! This is a war crime! There are laws! There are treaties! There are-"

"Words on a page," Subaru said in a bored tone. "'Civilized warfare' is an oxymoron. I have the power to kill all of you right now and if you don't order your men to surrender, I will do exactly that. *Then* I will butcher your soldiers."

"I will do no such thing!" The general protested.

Subaru shrugged. "Elsa. Kill him," He sighed.

The general's eyes widened as Elsa moved almost too fast to see. She grabbed him off his riding dragon and dumped him onto the ground. The general frantically tried to regain his feet as Elsa opened his midsection with an expression of delight.

The general screamed in pain and the remaining officers looked on in terror.

Subaru cleared his throat.

The officers returned their attention to Subaru.

"Tell me, was killing that man against the laws of war? Rhetorical question. I don't care. Now, I'm going to let Elsa keep butchering officers until someone tells that trumpeter to order the surrender."

The officers looked at Elsa in horror as she stuck her hands deep in the still-living general's guts, sighing with pleasure as if warming her hands over a campfire on a chilly morning.

"Make no mistake, I don't care either way. Your men have walked headlong into a trap. The only thing surrendering will accomplish is that fewer of them will die. But if you want all your men to die, that works for me too. A depopulated province is a *lot* easier to control and if you have any clue at all, you know that you're just led your troops into a meat grinder." Subaru pointed at the Sanshi army.

The officers looked at the still-clashing forces in the distance and their eyes widened in shock. At Subaru's suggestion, Siros had led the army through a variety of narrow paths between forests and glens in the surrounding landscape. The soldiers were becoming increasingly split up and communications between the groups had been all but severed though few soldiers had figured that out yet. They were easy prey for the well-organized forces of Siros.

The officers looked at one another helplessly and their faces fell.

"You lost this battle as soon as you took the field against me," Subaru said dismissively. "Give up now and you'll have fewer good men's lives on your conscience."

One of the officers sighed and nodded to the trumpeter. He blew a series of notes. The confused and widely separated Sanshi forces heard and they began to fall back.

"What will be our fate after the surrender?" An officer asked gravely.

"You'll be alive. Which is honestly better than you deserve as far as I'm concerned," Subaru said flatly. "These men trusted you with their lives. And you led them into disaster. In a perfect world, when a leader makes a poor decision, he'd be the first to die for it."

The battle ended quickly. The soldiers returned to the city gates to discover their leaders had been captured and a horde of slaving mabeasts were just waiting to attack. The soldiers, lacking direction and leadership, gave up when prompted and laid down their arms.

The Siros forces worked fast to corral and provide for the disarmed troops as Anri, Radu, and Gustov rode into Kocytos under heavy guard to enter negotiations with the lord of the city.

Subaru, Elsa and Meili took up position in the forest again.

Subaru wasn't too surprised that they had to kill three more messengers from Kocytos that night who attempted to slip past the army and warn Sanshi.

Elsa however was thrilled by the messengers' capture and Subaru and Meili reluctantly agreed to watch Elsa work as she demonstrated the techniques of proper vivisection.

The next morning, Subaru visited Anri in her command tent.

Anri sat in her command tent with her mother's rapier belted to her side. She wore a small breastplate and a kilt. Radu and Gustov sat with her.

"I assume that negotiations went well," Subaru began as he sat down.

Anri nodded. "The lord of the town, Robert an Griest, was killed some weeks ago and he hasn't been replaced yet. The locals claim he was murdered by a witch!"

"War makes men jump at shadows," Subaru shrugged.

Anri nodded. "The mayor was the one in charge during negotiations last night and he was *woefully* out of his depth. Not that it mattered. He knew that either he surrendered or Kocytos burned. The local nobility pouted and fumed but they swore their allegiance to me before the end."

Subaru nodded. "At this point you've basically won the war," Subaru said. "Sanshi's manpower is scattered and exhausted. Just head on down to the capitol and invite Griest to surrender."

"Sanshi is a heavily fortified town, Master Subaru," Gustov murmured. "Attacking it is a daunting prospect."

Anri nodded in agreement.

"You won't have to attack it," Subaru sighed. "Sanshi has barely enough manpower to man the walls. Also, I have it on good authority that an epidemic is ravaging the town. Sanshi is in *bad* shape. Finish your march south and invite Griest to surrender. He won't be able to argue."

Anri frowned. "Is there any risk of our own soldiers getting sick?" Anri asked.

Subaru shook his head. "I recognize this sickness. It's not a plague. It's cholera," He lied. "It's caused by bad water and it causes people to spend all their time in the bathroom. The wells in Sanshi must have gotten contaminated somehow and that's why the people are sick. Just make sure your soldiers don't eat or drink while inside the city and they'll be fine."

Anri frowned at Subaru for a long moment. "I'd never heard that cholera was caused by bad water before... I always assumed it was caused by a mana imbalance."

Subaru shrugged. "You learn something new every day."

"Moreover," Anri continued, looking at Subaru suspiciously. "If it's just cholera, why haven't the healers cured it yet? Cholera is entirely treatable with basic water magic."

"They seem to be having trouble," Subaru said calmly. "That's what happens when you treat the symptoms not the cause."

Anri frowned for a long moment. "If that's so then we should try to cleanse these wells. Or at least warn the people that that's the problem."

Subaru looked pained. "I'd... hold off on that, Anri. Don't give Malcolm Griest any wiggle-room to claim that your Shadows were dropping dead horses in the well."

"Dead horses?" Anri echoed.

"An old military tactic," Radu murmured. "And a war crime. Poisoning wells is a crime that punishes soldiers and civilians alike. Men of honor are forbidden from doing such things."

Subaru's expression didn't flicker.

Anri gave Subaru a hard look and was silent for several moments. Finally, she sighed. "Subaru," Anri protested. "We can't just let them-"

"There's a cure," Subaru assured her. "I've already sent out agents to find solutions to fix the water supply. We should have it in a few days. Have the army healers take care of the populace to mitigate the symptoms until then. Then my agents will cleanse the wells. The plague will end and you'll be everybody's hero."

Anri thought it over and finally nodded.

Gustov stroked his beard. "So now it seems all that remains is for us to negotiate with Malcolm an Griest," Gustov murmured.

Subaru nodded. "Send your emissaries and demand their unconditional surrender. At this point, you must have thousands of prisoners of war to use as leverage. Also you can march your army into the city whenever you want. You have significant funds, resources, and a solid chain of command. Sanshi has none of those things. Just remember that Sanshi has absolutely *no* leverage and use that fact to break them to harness."

Anri thought it over and her eyes slowly hardened. "It's about time they got a taste of their own medicine. Those lowlanders have afflicted my people for generations!"

Subaru nodded. "Don't give him *any* room to bargain. Sanshi is going to *surrender*. Unconditionally. They take orders from Siros from now on. Also, don't forget about the Ebony Stone," He reminded her.

Anri nodded.

Anri's army reached Sanshi the next morning. There was no battle.

Subaru's predictions of the weakened forces appeared to significantly underestimate the reality and the city surrendered quickly.

Subaru and Anri sat alone in her command tent.

"I wasn't expecting Sanshi to just surrender," Anri murmured.

Subaru nodded. "I doubt most people in the city are useful for very much right now. They're spending all their time shitting water."

"How many do you think died from this... disease?" Anri asked with thinly veiled suspicion.

"Almost none," Subaru said confidently. "The disease would only kill people who were already extremely weak and sickly."

Anri sighed, not finding this terribly comforting. "And how soon the symptoms stop once the water is cleansed?"

"We should be ready to cleanse the water by tomorrow night," Subaru murmured. "The symptoms should dissipate rapidly once they're drinking clean water. And your healers will help mitigate the pain and suffering until then."

Anri rubbed her forehead. "I know that war isn't glamorous but this seems... worse than I'd been taught to expect. Winning a victory because of innocent people suffering from a 'disease.'"

Subaru ignored the slightly suspicion tone that Anri applied to the word 'disease.' "Anri, you need to get a grip," Subaru said bluntly. "Remember how when we were making plans to attack Sanshi and take the city, General Stukov estimated that the casualties for Siros and Sanshi would run into twenty thousand killed or injured? We've taken the city and ended a war that's lasted a few centuries with a sacrifice of at most a couple of hundred. That's a *good* war."

Anri sighed. "I understand what you mean. And yet the term 'good war' seems oxymoronic to me right now."

"Point taken," Subaru admitted. "You'll be feeling guilty for this for a long time, Anri. But you'd probably be feeling guilty no matter what decision you made. That's part of being a leader. You saved as many lives as you could. That's all you can do."

Anri nodded.

Subaru started to say something and then looked up as a soldier entered the tent and saluted. "Your Highness," He said respectfully. "Malcolm an Griest has requested a meeting with you."

Anri nodded. "We'll be there right away."

The soldier saluted again, turned on his heel, and left.

Anri bowed her head and took a deep breath. A moment later, Anri put her doubts aside and cast her face into an expression of confidence as she left the tent.

Subaru followed silently after.

"Princess Kairei," Malcolm an Griest said through clenched teeth. The enormous bear of a man gave a stiff formal bow and stood up as quickly as he could. He leaned on an elaborate ivory cane. At his side was an enormous man with sandy blond hair and a beautiful dark haired woman in a flowing robe. The woman seemed to be leaning on the young man's arm.

Subaru lurked in the city street nearby, wearing his hood. He was surrounded by Sanshi townspeople. The local populace looked up at the nobles in fear, wondering how much worse their lives were about to get.

The group met on the steps of the Sanshi palace which sat in the heart of the city. Both leaders were surrounded by guards although Griest clearly had fewer.

Anri sank into a polite curtsy and held it for a moment or two longer than decorum strictly required. "We regret this outcome, Prince Malcolm. We are eager to begin negotiations for the restoration of our friendly and peaceful relations. We've been informed of the tragic plague ravishing your fair city. We are most anxious to bring our own healers here to assist as a sign of our goodwill."

The townspeople murmured and Griest scowled.

Subaru just hung back and watched. *When did you two ever have friendly relations? Subaru mused. Still, Anri is doing a good job. She's acting magnanimous in victory and putting her priority on helping the suffering people. The locals will see that and remember it. Griest's teeth-on-edge courtesy isn't doing him any favors.*

Once Anri's healers start tending to the people and the plague clears up tomorrow night, the locals will feel indebted to Anri. Griest's attempts to whip up trouble for Anri by appealing to nationalistic sentiment will be an uphill battle.

All of this is to Anri's good.

"Welcome to our city, Princess Kairei," The dark haired woman standing beside Malcolm said with a bow. She apparently realized that Malcolm was fuming too much to continue. "I am Deann an Griest. Let us repair to the conference room and bandage the terrible wounds that have afflicted southern Gusteko for all these years."

Malcolm turned around, grumbling under his breath and the party walked up the stairs into the the palace. The crowd outside slowly dispersed.

Subaru made to leave as well when something caught his eye. A woman was carrying a small bundle in her arms. She was surrounded by a small group of people as she approached a large wheelbarrow-like cart with a tarp on it that was being pushed by a lanky young man. The woman tenderly laid the bundle down in the cart and then fell back, crying piteously as her companions wrapped their arms around her and hurried her away.

Subaru swallowed hard as the lanky man picked up his cart and began to trundle it slowly past the palace.

Subaru stepped out into the street, blocking the cart's path. "Hey," He said sharply. "What's in that cart?"

The lanky man snorted at him. "Candy," He said sarcastically.

Subaru didn't bother to use *Indomitable*. The man was a head taller than Subaru but he was skin and bones. Subaru backhanded him across the face and then slammed him against a nearby post with one hand. "Do I look like the kind of man you want to get *smart* with?" He whispered.

The lanky man looked down at Subaru in fear.

"What's in the cart?" Subaru grated.

"Bodies!" The man yelped. "The people who died from the plague!"

"*How many died?!*" Subaru demanded.

"I don't know! How would I know?!" The man protested. "Enough to keep me doing this all week!"

The man broke free of Subaru and sprinted away a few steps. When Subaru made no show of going after him, the man calmed down. He got his composure back and spat on the sidewalk. The man pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket and read it. Then he scanned the area, looking for something. Finally, he approached a house not far away and knocked on the door.

The door opened and Subaru saw that the people inside had been crying. The man looked bored as he spoke to the residents.

Subaru put the man out of his mind and slowly approached the foul-smelling cart and lifted the flyblown tarp off of it.

Bodies. Close to a dozen bodies. A few were grandparents but most were small children.

The hellebore extract is no real threat to anyone healthy and strong, Subaru reminded himself, fighting for calm. But it can be fatal if your body was already weak from, let's say, old age. Or if you were very young and hadn't built up any defenses against poison.

Some of the bodies were wrapped up in swaddling clothes. *Did the babies drink the water or did they just suck in the poison with their mother's milk?*

The buzzing of flies was almost deafening. Subaru took a deep breath to steady himself but the repulsive odor threatened to send him into hysterics.

He quickly looked around to make sure that no one was nearby. "Listen," He whispered to the corpses. "I don't know if this will make you feel any better but your deaths have saved *thousands* of lives. Maybe even millions of lives over the next few centuries. Two hundred years of strife and intermittent war between Sanshi and Siros is finally over. No one else will suffer the way you have because of meaningless wars between two insignificant provinces in the north. You all... died heroes. You died for a reason," He finished lamely.

Subaru looked up and saw that the lanky man was returning to his cart accompanied by a young couple with a tiny bundle in their arms. The lanky man looked at Subaru in disgust when he saw him peering under the tarp but the lanky man was clearly too afraid of Subaru to say anything to him.

Subaru lowered the tarp with a sigh. "Are you done in this area?" He asked the lanky man pointedly.

The lanky man fumed but he nodded, not daring to talk back to Subaru. "Yeah, this is my last pick up of the day," He grumbled as the weeping couple placed their dead child in the cart.

Subaru took a deep breath as the couple fled the scene, wailing in despair. "Then move right along. If the princess sees this cart when she comes out, you're going to answer to *me*," He said ominously.

The lanky man swallowed hard and nodded. He grabbed his cart and quickly pushed it away.

Subaru took a deep, slow breath. *Alright. I admit that the death toll is... higher than I expected. But the decision we made was still sound! A few hundred lives sacrificed to save tens of thousands! I fucking dare anyone to tell me that this isn't a good trade! We made the right decision. The moral, ethical, responsible decision and the world will be a better place because of it.*

Everyone else sits around wringing their hands about the war but I actually did something about it. Somebody has to be willing to get his hands dirty for the greater good.

I wonder who I'm trying to convince...

Subaru slowly walked toward the Inn-Between hoping there was a place there where he could wash his hands.

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

"You are most generous, Princess Kairei," Deann said. "Our people are grateful for your support during their time of need."

Anri bowed her head graciously. *Malcolm does not seem like a particularly effective leader. The man has been sulking for this entire meeting. If not for his daughter taking the lead, nothing would be getting done.*

But I need to do one more thing. I'm just worried that I might choke doing it...

"I will return home to being the preparations. You may expect our first healers to arrive within the hour," Anri replied. "Also, is your Canmore about? I'd like to see him. As a matter of fact, I was hoping to have the opportunity to host him in Siros for a time."

Anri's words hung in the air for a long moment.

Malcolm turned purple with rage but he didn't dare say anything.

Deann looked grim. "Lady Kairei," Deann said slowly. "My brother is still very young. I am reluctant to send him away from everyone he knows. Could you perchance be persuaded to accept me in his place?"

Anri shook her head. "I really had my heart set on entertaining your father's heir," Anri said sadly.

Deann took a deep breath. "In that case, could I... appeal to you for hospitality? I've been meaning to travel for some time and I would like to keep my brother company on his journey."

"*What?!*" Malcolm shouted. "Your want to give her *more* than she asked for?!"

Deann gave Malcolm a chill look then ignored him and turned back to Anri. "Please, Lady Kairei," She implored. "Don't send my brother away from everyone he knows. Allow me to accompany him at the very least. The two of us are very close."

Anri nodded slowly. "Of course. I understand. I cherish my own brother as well."

"By your leave, Lady Kairei," Duncan said, speaking for the first time. "I'd like to come as well. To continue my studies under Lady Deann. It would also do my heart good to see Gael again after so long."

Anri smiled at him. "Of course, Sir Duncan. You are forever welcome at my home. As is any guest you might choose to bring with you."

Deann smiled sardonically. *Wonderful. I'm not an additional hostage. I'm a 'guest.' I suppose I should be grateful to Kairei for sparing what's left of my dignity.*

"There is one additional matter," Anri said. "I was hoping to take possession of the Ebony Stone from your treasury."

Deann, Duncan, and Malcolm all stared at her in confusion.

"The Witch's Stone? Why?" Deann asked in a baffled tone.

"One of our... alchemists believes that there are great secrets that could be unlocked within it," Anri replied.

Deann and Duncan shared a long look. *Taiyang*, They thought in unison. *This must have something to do with Taiyang. But we can not refuse in any case.*

"Of course, Lady Kairei," Deann said slowly. "I'll send for-"

"We don't have it," Malcolm snapped.

Anri blinked. "Excuse me?"

Malcolm gave Anri a nasty grin. "We don't *have* it. I sold it to a foreign collector named Meyer Scrofa. If you want it, talk to him."

Deann couldn't miss how Anri looked visibly dismayed by this news. "Father, why would you sell one of our treasures?" Deann asked in confusion.

Malcolm smirked. "I received... reliable intelligence that I should send it away."

Deann and Duncan shared a confused look.

"Splendidly done, Princess," Malcolm hissed. "You've finally won the war. I only wonder if this was truly worth selling your soul to Taiyang."

Anri and her advisers exchanged a confused look. "*Who* is Taiyang?" Anri asked. "And why do you keep talking about him?"

Malcolm just snorted and turned his face away.

Deann and Duncan exchanged a wary look. Deann's thoughts were grim. *I don't think she's lying...*

Kairei really has no idea who Taiyang is. So does that mean that they don't actually have a relationship? He did appear in order to rescue Kairei.

Or did he? Was rescuing the princess just incidental to saving his wife? Kairei claimed the woman was just her servant. Perhaps Taiyang sent his wife to infiltrate Siros with Kairei none the wiser. And if that's the case, was he helping Siros to win the war or was he just trying to spite us because of his wife's blindness? Was he working for Siros's good or just our bad?

The Inn-Between had been closed for days but luckily, Koi had left them the keys.

Senko, Meili, and Elsa sat in an empty taproom. Subaru stood behind the bar. He wasn't looking for drinks, he had found a sink and was furiously washing his hands.

Senko sat at a table patiently waiting for Subaru to finish what he was doing. Meili was watching Senko's twitching tail with fascination. Elsa was contentedly knitting a new doll. This one appeared to have fox ears.

"What's going on, Senko?" Subaru asked.

Senko gave a seated bow. "My organization has made a frankly astounding amount of money in the past few days. The 'double your money back' strategy really brought in the clients who thought that they had found an easy way to recoup their losses. Instead their goods were delivered safely and we got full price plus hazard pay. It would be fair to say that I am now a well-established merchant, Master."

"What about the folks who tried to cheat and arrange for your shipments to be destroyed?" Subaru asked, opening the cabinet under the bar and looking around.

"There were a few," Senko admitted. "Elsa discovered some new playmates that day. We managed to extract sworn affidavits from the hired thugs. I delicately explained to their employers that if they didn't want these statements made public and their names blackened in front of the entire Merchant's Association, they would need to show me some consideration for the foreseeable future. I'm now a preferred shipper of their goods and we have more contracts than I can possibly fill. I'm hiring aggressively right now to meet demand."

Subaru chuckled. "Nice work, Senko. I knew you'd be good at this."

Senko smiled and gave a little shiver of delight.

"Anything from your mother?" Subaru asked, opening the cabinet under the bar and rummaging around.

"I'm assured that Mother made a fortune smuggling the goods you and Lady Elsa waylaid. You have a sizable amount of gold waiting for you at the guest house. Lady Cynthia is spreading the *Soma* and establishing a large demand. I'm told that her VIP customers are constantly asking when more will be available. She's rather anxious for you to return home and begin producing more."

Subaru made a sound of triumph and pulled a small bottle out from under the bar. "Well, that shouldn't be a problem. Once we get the Ebony Stone, I expect I'll become a homebody for a while."

"Excuse me but what do you want that stone for, Master?" Senko asked curiously as Subaru came around from behind the bar and sat down at the table.

"Don't worry about it," Subaru said, not unkindly. He handed the bottle to Meili. "Here you go. More of that cream liquor you like so much."

Meili squealed in delight and grabbed the bottle.

"That bottle's not one of the big rewards from the success of this operations I had mentioned," Subaru admitted. "But hey, a treat's a treat."

Meili got up and went looking for glasses. "Subaru, did you see any ice or nuts back there?" Meili asked.

Subaru chuckled. "I can't say I did. But I wasn't actually looking." He turned his attention back to Senko. "So how do you like being a merchant?"

Senko thought for a moment. "To speak frankly, Master, at first I wasn't sure that I was going to like it at all. The people of Sanshi are openly rude and often cruel to me and my people. But I'm finding that I enjoy working with other demi-humans. We've all come from different origins but we're united in the contempt that we need to deal with from outsiders. We've formed a tight team for mutual benefit and we're exploring the world together. Truthfully, I hadn't seen very much of the world until recently. I very much enjoy seeing new sights."

"I'm glad you're finding it tolerable."

"Do you have any further instructions for me?"

Subaru scratched his chin. "Not at the moment. Try to keep your nose clean and build up your business. Tell your Mother that you've both done outstanding jobs and that you'll both be rewarded as soon as I get home to see to it."

Senko nodded. "Mother is quite enamored of the... *Vitae*?"

Subaru chuckled. "It's a precious resource. Lots of things are too precious to buy with coins. Very few are too precious to buy with heartbeats."

"Mother has put out feelers with wealthy persons across the continent who suffer from poor health and who would be willing to trade large amounts of gold and other resources to enjoy good health for a time."

"Sounds like a good business venture," Subaru replied.

Of course, if I want to sell Years, I still need to come up with a way to harvest them now that the war is over.

"I did *not* lie to you, Subaru," Anri said firmly.

That night, they sat alone in Anri's command tent. Subaru's face was stony.

Anri continued, "According to Malcolm an Griest, he sold the stone sometime last week. The information was still good when I gave it to you."

Subaru took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And where is the stone now?"

"A man named Meyer Scrofa has it," Anri replied. "He's apparently a powerful merchant in southern Lagunica. I'll send out feelers immediately to discuss purchasing the stone. I owe you that much."

Subaru's face was rigid. "Is there *any* chance of that working?" Subaru grumbled.

Anri looked awkward. "I'm... not sure," She admitted. "I don't know much about Scrofa but from what I've heard he has a bad reputation. He might even be involved in criminal enterprise. Subaru, why do you want the Stone anyway?"

Subaru took a deep breath. "It will let me make a medicine that will cure Emilia."

Anri's eyes widened. "*Really?!?*"

"That's why I need the Stone."

Anri nodded. "I'll use every kind of pressure I can to make Scrofa sell me the stone. We should have ample resources to make a serious offer. Now that the Gap has been closed by mabeasts," Anri trailed off and gave Subaru a hard look.

Subaru looked back stonily.

Anri sighed. "Merchants are coming north through Siros in droves. We expect a huge boom in trade to follow shortly."

"Well, I appreciate you doing your best to help me get the Stone," Subaru said, struggling to be polite.

Anri hesitated. "Subaru, I'd like you and Emilia to consider coming back to Siros with me. You helped me end the war. Even if you did use every underhanded and treacherous trick I can think of," She admitted glumly. "I'm deeply in your debt. I could help you take care of Emilia. I owe you that much. And I think you'd make an excellent adviser."

Subaru's thoughts churned inside of him. "Maybe," He admitted. "For the moment, I think I'd rather stay close to my lab. Emilia needs medicine and it will take time to get my equipment set up in Siros. But maybe I'll start looking for a house in the area."

"I'd like that," Anri commented.

The following night, Subaru, Elsa, Meili, and Senko all joined Koi in her meeting room back at the estate. Senko's hair-dye was wearing off. Now that everyone knew she was Koi's daughter, she had stopped dying her hair and her natural black and red color was resurfacing.

"So, just to get started," Subaru said, pulling four small bottles out of his robe, "I want to thank everyone for the exceptional work they've done over the past few days."

He handed out the *Vitæ* and it was taken eagerly.

The four women drank the potions and languorously slumped in their seats in a blissful daze.

"I'll also be cooking *Soma* tonight," Subaru murmured to no one, waiting for the girls to recover. "I should have ten to fifteen kilos for Cynthia sometime tomorrow."

Koi slowly pulled herself together. "Cynthia will be ecstatic. Now that her best customers have tasted *Soma*, she's having a tough time arousing their interest in anything else she has for sale."

"*Soma's* funny that way," Subaru commented.

"Also, she had a meeting with Lepus a few nights ago."

"Who?"

"Lepus," Senko broke in. "One of the Coin bosses in Kararagi. He runs Ivada."

Koi looked at Senko with surprise at her knowledge of this. "In any event, Lepus and his men were offered a sample of *Soma* and they loved it. They want to make a deal to buy more. Rumor has it that they also brought it up at their most recent meeting with the other 'Brothers.' They think there might be a major market in Kararagi for the drug. They're asking for a meeting with you."

Subaru shrugged. "That's fine," Subaru said without much interest.

"Also, I suppose congratulations are in order," Koi continued. "You conquered Sanshi and the war is over."

"For now," Subaru said ominously.

"What do you mean, Master?" Koi asked with a frown.

Subaru sighed. "I have since discovered that Sanshi doesn't have the Ebony Stone, which was my whole reason for conquering Sanshi in the first place."

"Where is it?" Senko asked.

Subaru scowled. "Meyer Scrofa has it apparently."

Senko looked at Koi in alarm. Koi's expression was icy. "That is indeed dire news, Master."

"You know Scrofa?" Subaru asked.

"Better than I'd like," Koi admitted. "He was Zeno's master. That should probably give you some idea as to his character."

"I have a vague notion," Subaru grumbled. "Alright. Senko, I think you told me that Scrofa was trying to take over the Coins?"

"Yes," Senko nodded.

"How did you know about that?" Koi asked in surprise.

Senko gave her mother an arch look. "I keep my ear to the ground, Mother. You always taught me that knowledge was power. I paid close attention to the Coins so that I'd know what to do if you were ever in danger."

Koi looked shocked.

"See why I hired her?" Subaru asked with a chuckle.

Koi shook off her amazement. "More recently, it appears that Scrofa has heard of *you*, Master. He's discovered that you killed Zeno and stole his men."

"It'd be hard to keep something like that a secret for long," Subaru admitted. "Guessing he doesn't like me much right now."

Koi nodded. "Very true. In the year since Maiale's death, Scrofa already has the Coins in Lagunica and Vollachia mostly in his pocket. He could probably conquer Gusteko by

main force but the Coins in Kararagi are a different matter."

"How so?" Subaru asked.

"They're called the Tong," Senko picked up the story. "The underbosses in Kararagi are notoriously independent. They rarely even have a Boss running the entire kingdom much less allow a King of Shadows to be crowned. Maiale's reign for all those years was only possible because he managed to bring the Tong to the table and convince them to bow."

"Scrofa is extremely unpopular," Koi continued. "He's greedy and cowardly and not much of a leader. He's basing most of his appeal off the fact that he's good at making money and he's the strongest underboss left. He was basically appealing to the 'inevitability' of his victory to win the remaining underbosses over to him. If he'd conquered Gusteko as he planned, his coronation might have really appeared to be inevitable. But when you spiked that wheel and became the defacto 'Boss' of Gusteko, you challenged his image. I've heard that the underbosses of Kararagi are looking at Scrofa with increasing disfavor. Remember, the Kararagi underbosses have never heard of you, Master, and they're inclined to dismiss the more extravagant stories of your power. From their point of view, Scrofa just had his nose bloodied by a newcomer with no experience."

Subaru chuckled. "Well, that's fine. I don't have much interest in being crowned King. I just finished a race for the throne and it wasn't much fun."

Koi's jaw dropped. "Master, excuse me, but have you considered the kind of power that the King of Shadows can-"

"I *have* power," Subaru corrected Koi, not unkindly. "I've learned over the past few months that power has very little to do with crowns and bowing. Power is power. Those Kararagi bosses can crown whomever they choose. They'll still be coming to me, hat in hand, for *Soma* and Years. And a dozen other potions I haven't had time to make so far. They're free to think I have no power over them. As long as they do what I need done, that's fine. If they ever refuse to do what I need done, I can change their minds in a hurry about who has the power."

Koi considered that.

"But that's neither here nor there," Subaru grumbled. "The priority right now is to find Scrofa and get the stone. Purchase it if we can, seize it by force if we have to."

"I like the second option," Elsa said, knitting in her chair contentedly.

Meili raised her hand. "I'd also prefer violence and bloodshed if we're counting votes."

Subaru gave them both a patient look. "Anyway," He sighed, turning back to Koi. "Where can I find Scrofa?"

"I'm afraid I really have no idea," Koi admitted. "Scrofa lives in hiding and uses his minions to do the dirty work for him."

Subaru squinted at her. "Then how is he even hoping to become 'king?' Nobody will follow a coward!"

Koi shrugged. "He claims that being able to influence things from the shadows is what makes him smart. Makes him powerful. So far that claim has born fruit. Now that you've called it into question, I expect he'll be looking to send some heat toward you."

"Have you ever met him?"

"Once," Koi said, curling her lip. "He's a pig demi-human. A man of enormous size and crude manner. Nobody really likes him but he is a wily old jackal with a sharp insight for where and how to do the most damage. I believe he lives in Vollachia somewhere but truthfully, I don't know."

Subaru thought about it. "Maybe we can ask Farouk. He worked for him."

Koi shook her head. "I doubt that even Zeno knew where Scrofa was based. There's no chance Farouk would."

Subaru made a face. "Right. Well, I am open to suggestions."

"Master," Senko said differentially. "There could be a larger problem."

"What's that?"

"Scrofa could rally all the Coins against you. He's probably already working on painting you as an outsider meddling in their business. If he is able to convince the others of that you'll be wading through whole armies before you can focus on Scrofa."

Subaru grimaced. "I was hoping I could avoid that by staying out of the competition for leader."

"With respect, Master," Senko continued. "I think that's the wrong strategy. And exactly what Scrofa would hope you do."

Subaru raised an eyebrow. He glanced at Koi who seemed equally surprised. "What do you mean?"

"If you're an outsider then you're a threat to the Coins. He won't have too much trouble convincing the other underbosses to unite against you and more importantly to unite behind him. If you formally establish yourself as the Boss of Gusteko, an easy claim to make since Mother and Cynthia will back you and they're the only underbosses left in the kingdom, then it becomes a matter of one Boss versus another. It's 'politics as usual' and it's between two leaders that the Kararagi Tong don't really care about. They'll decide that it's none of their concern and stay out of it. You'll still be forced to deal with the underbosses in Lagunica and Vollachia who support Scrofa but that's much better than taking them on and the Tong."

"That is," Koi said slowly. "A rather brilliant insight!"

Senko flushed.

Subaru drummed his fingers on the chair. "We might be able to do a little better." He turned to Koi. "You said that the Tong wanted a meeting with me?"

"Some of them do at least," Koi replied.

"If I start making deals with the Tong, Scrofa will have to step in and stop me or his campaign to be King of Shadows will lose momentum. That might be enough to drag him into the open..."

Koi nodded slowly. "I'll start making arrangements for a conference."

A few days later, Subaru found himself at a large room conference table with three men from Kararagi. Surprisingly enough they were all demi-humans. One had feline features with pointed ears and slit, golden eyes. Another appeared to have weasel blood, he was strangely tall and thin and his hair had black and white streaks. The last man was much older. His hair was white and his long, white ears stuck up right from the top of his head. He was quite short.

Subaru sat at the table with Koi and Cynthia on either side of him. At Koi's suggestion, Subaru had not wrapped himself in shadows for this meeting. Elsa sat in a corner, knitting silently.

The rabbit demi-human, an older man with long white ears and long white hair took a puff off his cigar. "So you're the famous Taiyang we've been hearing so much about. Funny. I thought you'd look scarier."

Subaru shrugged. "I can arrange that, Lepus, if you'd prefer it," Subaru briefly triggered *Endless Hunger*. Just enough to make his body flicker in the light and fill the room with an unnatural dark chill. A moment later it ended but the underbosses all looked startled.

"Frankly," Subaru continued. "I don't really like to scare people if I don't have to. You should use only as much force as needed. Anything more than that is a waste. Don't throw a punch if a threat will do. Don't make a threat if a polite remark will accomplish the same."

Lepus stroked his chin. "Wise words," He admitted. "So. You're the new Boss of Gusteko?"

"That's right," Subaru said. "I run things up here. I understand you're more democratic in Kararagi."

The cat hissed a laugh. "I wouldn't say democratic! We just don't bow! Every city in Kararagi has its own boss and we like it that way. We organize when we need to and we stay separate beyond that. We don't need a boss to tend to business, much less a King of Shadows."

Subaru shrugged. "Makes sense to me, Ailuro. I usually prefer partners to bosses and minions. Minions you need to tend to and supervise and reward them when they do well. It's just a lot of work. And don't even get me started on bosses."

Subaru took a sip of wine from his glass. He saw that the three underbosses were looking at him curiously.

So far I've defied their expectations. That's always a good start.

"I thought you had bigger ambitions than that," The weasel said skeptically. "Scrofa claims you want the throne."

"I never met Scrofa, Mustel," Subaru replied. "So I'm not sure how he'd know that. We're all really busy gentlemen, so let me break it down for you. I'm selling *Soma* and other drugs you've never imagined. You meet my price and they're yours. That seems like a good foundation for a business relationship."

Lepus looked thoughtful. "Sounds promising," He admitted, knocking some ashes off his cigar. "But what about this '*Vitae*' I've been hearing rumors about?"

"That's a little different," Subaru replied. "*Vitae* is reserved for people I want to reward for loyalty and faithful service. Immortality isn't cheap. If you gentlemen want to discuss getting your own supply of *Vitae* then we should talk about that separately."

Lepus leaned back in his chair, his eyes glistening.

He got the message, Subaru thought. The drugs can be bought but for Vitae he'll need to show me loyalty. Lepus is old enough that the Vitae might well bring him to the table. And if I can gain the support of a few of the Tong underbosses that will send Scrofa into a panic. He might even emerge from the shadows to take action against me...

"I have a question," Mustel snorted, raising his hand.

Subaru raised his eyebrow. *Something tells me this isn't going to be a real question.* "Go ahead."

"I can't help but notice that every one of your 'underbosses' has tits!" Mustel sneered. "Does everyone have to prove loyalty by sucking your cock?"

Koi and Cynthia's eyes both blazed at the mocking weasel but neither one said anything.

"Elsa?" Subaru whispered.

Before Mustel could even blink, his forehead was slammed hard against the table. The other two bosses leaped back in their chairs as Elsa yanked his head back and caressed his throat with her blades. Mustel's eyes were glazed and his forehead was wet with blood.

"Taiyang!" Lepus shouted. "This is outrageous!"

The room turned black as midnight and cold as a winter storm. "Silence!" Subaru roared in a hollow, echoing voice.

Lepus and Ailuro's jaws dropped as they saw the unnatural shadow that was Taiyang.

And then it ended. The room was perfectly normal again.

"Mustel," Subaru said calmly. "I'm afraid I find your words quite offensive. I will have to ask you to leave now. All the same, since you have grossly insulted my subordinates, I require that you apologize to Koi and Cynthia individually. *Then* you will leave. Elsa, if Mustel makes *any* statement other than ones entirely consistent with what I have specified, I want you to skin him alive, layer by layer."

Mustel was panting for breath. His eyes darted around like a trapped animal but with Elsa's blades pressed against his throat, he didn't dare to move.

Lepus and Ailuro sat there like statues, afraid that any action might put them on Elsa's hit list.

"I'm growing impatient, Mustel," Subaru said mildly.

Mustel took a deep breath. "My deepest apologies to you, Lady Koi," He squeaked. "And to you Lady Cynthia. I don't know what I was thinking. If you could only forgive me for my poor choice of words, I promise to leave now and never come back!"

Subaru scratched his chin. "Lady Koi, Lady Cynthia. How would you characterize his apology? You are both valued members of my organization and it is important that you both recognize that. If either of you do not feel suitably appeased by his apology, please let me know and I will give you his skin as reparations."

Mustel gave a shrill squeal.

Koi and Cynthia shared a smug look.

"As always, Master Taiyang," Cynthia murmured. "Thank you for your protection. I think that Mustel now fully appreciates the weight of his error."

"As do I," Koi purred. "I expect he won't make such foolish mistakes in the future."

Subaru mulled it over for a moment and then made a gesture. "Very well, let him go."

Elsa looked only slightly disappointed as she took her daggers away from his throat.

Mustel leaped to his feet and bolted toward the door. Before he left, he turned back toward the conference table, his face fixed in a snarl and he opened his mouth wide.

"For every word you speak," Subaru said calmly. "I will give Elsa license to remove an inch of your tongue and one of your fingers. If you ever attempt to interfere with my operations, I will ensure that mabeasts attack your secret, private estate outside of Outou and eat your children. Do not reply. Just look frightened and scuttle."

Mustel's face turned white. He slowly closed the door without a sound.

Lepus and Ailuro both looked at Subaru in shock. Elsa calmly returned to her seat and took out her knitting.

Subaru shook his head. "Boorish fellow," He mused. "I hate dealing with people like that. As you can see, I don't tolerate anyone threatening my allies. I trust that you're both too sensible to make a similar mistake."

Lepus looked thoughtful. "You may have just made a powerful enemy, Lord Taiyang."

"If Mustel wants to discuss it, I'm at his immediate disposal. But let us focus on more pleasant matters. You both wish to discuss a shipment of *Soma*, I believe?"

Ailuro snorted. "Alright. I won't act like I don't respect a man who protects his people. Understand me, I'm not looking to kneel to a new King! But... I might be willing to show you loyalty. *If* we had the right agreement..."

Cynthia, Koi, and Subaru sat in Koi's sitting room that night. Senko was occupied with her mercantile concerns so instead of tea they drank wine.

"That went better than I could have imagined," Koi murmured.

"Mostly thanks to you, Koi," Subaru murmured. "You knew that Mustel was already on Scrofa's payroll and where his estate was."

"Lepus and Ailuro don't much care for Mustel anyway," Cynthia added. "I think they might have brought him along just to see how you handle enemies."

"I don't think they were disappointed," Subaru said.

"No! Lepus and Ailuro did everything but say that their support was for sale!" Koi agreed. "All they want is a few Years of *Vitae* and proof that you can make money for them."

"That part surprised me," Cynthia murmured, swirling her drink. "According to them, Scrofa is trying to prove how much money he can make for his people over the next three months to solidify his support. He's calling it a challenge."

"A challenge he didn't bother to deliver to us," Subaru muttered.

"I doubt anyone takes it seriously anyway," Koi shrugged. "Scrofa has Lagunica and Vollachia to play in. And parts of Kararagi. We have Gusteko and *maybe* a bit of Kararagi. We can't compete with him economically so it's not much of a challenge. He'll win at a walk. You might as well challenge a fish to a foot race."

Subaru chuckled. "Sounds like winning would be a lot of fun, wouldn't it?"

Koi squinted. "I'm... sorry?"

Subaru smirked. "It's time to send a shot across Scofa's bow. You're right. Everyone expects him to win this challenge without blinking. They don't think we can do anything at all. So once we win, Scrofa is screwed. He'll have to come out into the open to protect his interests and I can get my Stone. Ladies, I have a few jobs for you..."

Subaru spent the next several days brewing *Vitae* and *Soma*. He was quickly amassing a small mountain of gold. *Soma* was selling like crazy and while *Vitae* had to be offered much more... selectively to preserve Emilia's supply, Koi was having no difficulty finding people who would pay fortunes to increase their lives and health.

Meili and Elsa were catching up on their sleep and if Subaru wasn't working in the lab he was sitting beside the unconscious Emilia.

The past few days, Emilia had started murmuring in her sleep and Subaru hoping that she would wake up any day now.

Subaru had asked Senko to find him some books at the market so he could read to Emilia. He'd heard that could help people in a coma.

It was better than nothing.

Just before sunset, Subaru was halfway through the second book in the *Sophia and the Ruby Princess* series when Niobe entered the bedroom.

"Excuse me, Master Subaru," Niobe said with a curtsy. "Lady Koi requests your presence in her sitting room."

Subaru nodded and put a bookmark in the book. "Tell her I'll be there shortly. And can you send over some broth for Emilia's dinner?"

Niobe curtsied again and left the room.

Subaru found Elsa and Meili in the sitting room downstairs. Elsa was knitting and Meili was dozing on the sofa with her tiger doll.

"Hey, Meili," Subaru said. "I have a little task for you."

Meili yawned. "What's that?"

"I'm going to go meet with Koi," Subaru said. "Emilia seems to be dreaming. I think that she might wake up any time now and I'm worried about Emilia waking up while I'm gone. I don't know how much damage the medicine has been able to repair but the last time she woke up, she was blind and still paralyzed from the waist down. In other words, she's helpless. If she wakes up all alone, she'll panic so I need someone to be here to watch her."

Meili shrugged. "I can do that."

"Thanks. Her dinner will be over here soon. Just make sure to give it to her a few drops at a time. Oh, and just remember, Emilia will probably act like she remembers you from Arlem. So... just be aware of that."

Meili frowned. "Subaru, that's the second time you've said that but I never met your wife when I was in Arlem."

Subaru sighed. "Look... Emilia... Roy ate Emilia's name and that means that nobody in the world can remember her," He said bluntly.

Meili just stared at him. "Is this a joke?" She asked incredulously.

"No," Subaru grumbled. "That really happened. That's why I killed Roy."

"You *killed* Roy?!" Elsa and Meili gasped in stereo.

"Yeah. Why? Were you guys friends with him or something?"

"No!" Meili shuddered. "Lye was terrifying and Roy was even worse!"

Elsa looked sick. "I've known Lye and Roy since I was Meili's age. They never seemed to age or get older, just like Mother. Worse, they never miss a chance to run their hands all over you and whisper to you how delicious they think you'll be! When I was younger, they'd sneak up behind me while I was getting dressed and sniff my skin." She shuddered.

Meili nodded fervently.

Subaru made an expression of disgust. "Alright. Well... Roy won't be eating anything ever again. So... there's that."

Elsa closed her eyes. "Subaru, I know several dozen assassins who will bless you in their prayers every night."

"Assassins pray?" Subaru said in surprise.

"Why not?" Elsa shrugged. "We all need to ask forgiveness, don't we?"

"But... they kill people."

"Naturally. What do you think they're asking forgiveness for?"

Subaru closed his eyes. "OK... We are not going to get any deeper into this existential lunacy. Meili, please sit with Emilia. If she wakes up, try to keep her calm until I get back."

"Right," Meili said with determination.

"Elsa, you should probably keep your distance," Subaru said. "Emilia might recognize your voice and since she'll remember you trying to *gut* us, she might go into hysterics. So please steer clear of her until I get a chance to explain the situation."

Elsa shrugged. "That's fine. I wouldn't be much of a nursemaid anyway."

"Welcome, Master," Koi murmured as Senko poured tea.

"Good evening, Koi," Subaru replied, handing her a heavy bag. "As requested, fifteen kilos of *Soma* and five years of *Vitae*. You have buyers lined up?"

"I located a few people willing to pay *mountains* of golds to delay their inevitable end," Koi purred. "Not to mention earning a great day of goodwill from the other underbosses."

"At the moment, *Vitae* is at a premium," Subaru warned her. "It's not easy to make until we get the Stone and Emilia needs a dose every day."

Koi nodded. "I understand, Master. I'll only offer *Vitae* to our most exclusive clientele. Men and women who can offer... *more* than gold to secure your favor," She chuckled.

Subaru nodded. *I don't want to waste the years as long as Emilia needs them but a Year or two to the right person could go a long way. I just need to find a new way to steal lives now that the war is over.*

Koi continued, "Master, I believe I've found the man that you were looking for."

"Oh?"

"His name is Chandler," Koi replied. "He lives in Ivada. He's remarkable at his work and he's the only one that I would recommend for jobs of this delicacy. Even better, he has a history of working with House Griest. But he's also in a spot of trouble right now."

"What kind of trouble?" Subaru asked.

Koi shrugged. "He's apparently under investigation for a triple homicide. He turned violent when his affections for a certain woman were not returned and her brothers became involved as well."

Subaru scowled. "So he's garbage, basically."

Koi raised an eyebrow. "I have a factor in Ivada. They'll help you to... deliver him. However, I urge you to be cautious. Chandler attempted to double-cross me the last time we did business. He barely escaped with his skin," Koi almost growled. She shook her head with a grimace. "Very few escape my displeasure. I'd like to tie up that loose end..."

Subaru took a deep breath. "You know, this Chandler sounds like the perfect man for this job."

"In spite of our checkered past, I am forced to agree. He is extremely talented," Koi said. "He's the *only* man I'd recommend for a job of this delicacy."

"I meant that he sounds like the kind of man that no one will miss once the job's over."

"Thanks, Big Sis," Meili said. The pair had just finished spoon feeding Emilia some broth for dinner. Elsa had been asked to assist once Meili realized that she didn't have enough hands to keep Emilia's head up while feeding her. Neither one was a natural nurse but they were determined to do their best and prove their dedication to Subaru whom they had each come to adore.

The pair had shared a long discussion last night, realizing that, without ever specifically requesting it, Subaru had gained from them the kind of blind obedience and deep affection that Capella had always wanted.

They had debated once again if Subaru had put a spell on them.

"No problem, Meili," Elsa said, gathering up the spoon and empty bowl. "Do you need any help doing anything else for her?"

Meili thought about it. "I don't."

"Elsa."

The whisper sent a shiver up Meili's spine. She turned around and saw that Emilia's eyes, milky as a frozen lake, were wide open and terrified.

"Elsa!" Emilia screamed, struggling to push away herself from the sound of the voice using only her hands.

Elsa bit her lip.

"No, no!" Meili said quickly. "There's nobody named Elsa here!" She threw a quick apologetic look toward her sister. *Go get Subaru!* Meili mouthed.

Elsa nodded. The assassin crept away with the dishes as silently as she could.

Emilia had grabbed her pillows and was holding them out in front of her like a pair of shields. "Why can't I see?!" Emilia almost screamed.

Meili winced. "So... you got... kind of sick..." Meili said awkwardly.

"Where's Subaru?!" Emilia shouted.

"He'll be back! Soon!" Meili said, fervently hoping that she was telling the truth and that she wouldn't have to explain to Subaru how she let his wife fall to pieces while he was gone.

Emilia hid behind her pillows. "Where's Anri?" Emilia whispered.

"Um. She went back to Siros..."

"Anri's gone too?" Emilia whimpered, trembling behind her flimsy fort.

Meili swallowed hard. "Subaru left us... me here to look after you until he gets back. My name is Meili."

"Meili," Emilia whispered. "Meili... from Arlem?"

Meili's eyes widened. "Yeah... I was friends with Petra," Meili said awkwardly.

"What are you doing here?"

Meili hesitated. Truthfully, she had more than half-believed that Subaru was just messing with her with his story about 'eaten names' and that Emilia might somehow know her. Now Meili realized that she didn't have any cover story planned to tell Emilia. Unfortunately, telling Emilia that Meili was really an assassin who had worked Mother and now worked for Subaru seemed equally unwise and that didn't even factor in mentioning Elsa's involvement in all this.

She'd just have to wing it.

"Subaru saved me," Meili began. *That's a safe place to start. Like Big Sis always says, however much you can admit to of the truth usually makes the best foundation for a lie.* "My sister and I were about to be murdered by Mother Capella but Subaru swooped in and saved us!"

Emilia still huddled behind her pillow-fort but she seemed to be trembling a little less. "I didn't know you had a sister," She murmured.

Meili shrugged. A moment later, Meili realized that Emilia couldn't see the gesture. "She wasn't with me in Arlem. We'd been separated for a while but we finally found each other again."

"Where am I? Why can't I see?!" Emilia's moan rose to shriek.

"We're in Sanshi. Subaru got us a place to stay while we made your medicine."

"When will Subaru be back?" Emilia asked plaintively.

"Soon," Meili emphasized. "I just sent Big Sis off to find him! He'll be back, um... before sunset, probably."

"When is that?"

Meili blinked, realizing that Emilia couldn't see the sun out the window. "Uh. Well, it's going to depends on what he's doing but he's not far away so I'm sure Big Sis will bring him back quickly!"

Emilia curled up in her nest and whimpered.

"And I'm here!" Meili desperately tried to reassure her. "And I'm going to take good care of you! I'll bring you whatever you want!"

Emilia whimpered. "Subaru. I want Subaru..." She whispered.

"Senko," Subaru continued. "Where are you licensed?"

"I got my master merchant license in Ganaks. Lagunica is fairly liberal about these things and it didn't cost too much to grease the wheels so I could get one quickly. My employees are journeyman merchants and their licenses are from all over the place since most of them had a license before they signed up with me. If I needed to buy an employee a license, I got it in Ganaks."

"Journeyman merchant?" Subaru asked in confused.

"A merchant who by law can't run his own shop," Senko explained. "Merchant guilds in each province restrict the number of 'master merchant' licenses available to reduce competition. I'm licensed as a Master Merchant in Lagunica and that allows me to ship goods anywhere in the world as well as open shops in Lagunica if we wish."

Koi looked rather impressed at how knowledgeable Senko was on the topic.

Senko noticed her Mother's expression and flushed. "I've been studying, Mother," She said proudly.

Subaru nodded and thought hard for a moment. "Senko, I'd like you to try to get licensed in Siros as well."

Senko looked pained. "That might be expensive, Master," She warned him. "Siros is more opened-minded than most northern provinces but master merchant licenses are still very expensive, especially to foreigners and..." Senko shrugged and gestured at her long, elegant tail.

Subaru made a face. "Understood. Start making inquiries and feel it out. I'll supply money if we need bribes. I'd rather not go this way but if it really becomes necessary, I can have the Princess issue a request."

"Why are we trying to get Senko a Siros license?" Koi asked in confusion.

"I'm going to set up some opportunities for Senko to take advantage of," Subaru replied. "Also, Koi, I'd like you to begin stockpiling nonperishable food and easy to use weapons like crossbows."

Koi frowned.

"I'm going to create a criss in the north," Subaru said before she could ask. "If you two are well positioned, you can make a fortune."

Koi thought for a moment. "What kind of-"

There was a frantic knock on the door.

Koi's eyes narrowed. She had standing orders that her meetings were only to be interrupted in cases of dire emergency.

Subaru engulfed himself in shadows just in case and then gestured toward Koi.

"Enter," Koi said.

Elsa slipped inside and slammed the door behind her.

Subaru dispelled his shadow. "Elsa? What are you doing here?"

"Emilia's awake and she's freaking out," Elsa said urgently.

Subaru jumped to his feet. "I'm on my way. Elsa, I need you to go and grab someone for me. Koi has the details."

"I'll take care of it, master," Elsa promised.

Subaru raced out the door.

Subaru ran the whole way back to the guest house. Meili met him at the door.

"Emilia is awake!" Meili said, sounding frantic.

"Then what the hell are you doing down here?" Subaru asked incredulously.

"I don't know, Subaru! Everything I say to her just seems to freak her out more!"

"What did you say to her?" Subaru demanded.

"Nothing! Subaru, I was doing my best 'cute little lost girl' shtick! She's just... going crazy up there!"

"Shit!" Subaru swore and raced up the stairs, taking them three at a time.

"Emilia?!" Subaru shouted as he raced into the room.

He stopped in his tracks, looking incredulous.

Emilia had built herself a pillow-fort on the bed. She was completely concealed inside of it. Subaru saw one milky eye peer out from between the pillows. She'd stripped the bed of blankets and pillows and had wrapped them all around herself. It appeared that the one bed's supply of pillows hadn't been satisfactory to her and that Emilia had sent Meili out to strip the other beds of pillows and blankets.

"Subaru?" Emilia whispered.

"Mili?" Subaru said as gently as she could.

"Subaru, is it really you?" She whimpered.

Subaru frowned. "It's me, Mili. Oh, and I love your fort!" He said, frantically trying to sound cheerful.

Emilia was almost completely hidden inside her fort but she didn't appear to be smiling at his joke.

"Um, can I squeeze in there too?" He asked.

Subaru gently lifted a blanket from her fort and Emilia flinched back.

Subaru froze in place. "It's me, Mili," He whispered. Emilia seemed like a frightened and wounded animal. She clearly wanted to flee but between her blindness and limp legs, she couldn't run anywhere.

"Mili, can I... touch your hand?" He asked gently.

Emilia didn't reply.

Subaru took a deep breath. "Mili, I'm going to touch your *right* hand, OK?"

Emilia didn't reply.

Subaru gently reached out and stroked the back of her right hand.

Emilia jerked away as if she'd touched something hot.

"Su...Subaru?" Emilia whispered.

"That's right, Mili," He said reassuringly. "I'm here." He touched her hand again and this time, Emilia flinched less, not breaking contact with his hand. Subaru pulled her closer and gathered her into his arms inside the pillow fort.

Emilia was panting for breath and her milky eyes filled up with tears.

Subaru could tell an eruption was coming. "It's OK, Mili," He whispered. "Just let it out."

Emilia buried her face in Subaru's chest and wailed in despair.

Subaru could feel her tears soaking into his shirt.

It took Emilia close to an hour to calm down. They spent the entire time inside Emilia's pillow-fort. Something about being able to touch the 'walls' was clearly comforting to Emilia.

"Subaru," She whispered finally. "What... happened to Daddy and Beatrice?"

Subaru took a deep breath. "Roswaal... got to them before I could."

"Roswaal?!!" Emilia gasped. "What does *he* want with them?"

"Hostages," Subaru growled. "He's holding them ransom so that I'll do something for him."

Emilia's face was pale. "What does he want?!" She breathed.

Subaru growled, "I haven't the foggiest idea!" He sighed. "Roswaal's letter raised more questions than it answered but at least we don't have to worry about the spirits right now. Roswaal will take good care of Beatrice and Puck because he knows that's the only way that he can get me to cooperate."

"But, Subaru, how are you going to do what he wants if you don't know what it is?"

Subaru shrugged. "It's fine. When he's ready, he'll contact me and start negotiating. We just need to wait."

"Subaru, you can't trust Roswaal."

Subaru snorted. "No kidding! I can't trust him as far as I can kick him! But I'll happily buy him off if that's the only way to get Beatrice and Puck back."

Emilia was silent.

"Mili," Subaru said gently. "What happened after I left the house?" Anri had told him the high points but he knew that Emilia needed to talk about it.

Emilia's blind eyes filled with tears. "Subaru, they came into the house and they took Anri and me away. I had no magic and I couldn't move... I've never felt so helpless! They beat me! They dragged me down the stairs!" She shuddered. "I was half-naked but they still brought me outside and they dragged me through the dirt and then they *threw* me into the carriage like I was a piece of garbage!"

Emilia was shaking and sobbing as she talked. Subaru rubbed her back, encouraging her to keep talking.

Emilia was panting for breath. It took her a long time to continue. "They brought us to Sanshi and the prince said..." Emilia shuddered. She couldn't get the words out. "He said... His soldiers... held me down on the ground and they pressed my face down on a stone block! A man came with an axe and-"

Emilia broke off weeping hysterically.

Subaru stroked her hair and fought not growl as he once again imagined burning Sanshi to the ground.

Anri didn't tell me about that part. If she had, I would have put a much more effective poison in those wells...

After a few minutes, Emilia calmed down enough to continue. "Anri said that the prince threw away my medicine. And now... I can't see..."

"It's temporary," Subaru said reassuringly.

Oh. Please, God, tell me I'm not lying...

"I can't walk, I can't use magic, I can't even see. I'm worthless!" Emilia sobbed.

"You're not worthless!" Subaru snapped. With great effort, he forced his voice to be calm. "You're sick," He whispered. "And we're going to make you all better. You're here, you're safe, and we have plenty of medicine to make you better."

"Subaru," Emilia wept. "We'll *never* be safe. The whole world wants us dead! Especially me!"

Subaru took a deep breath. "Then I'll fight the whole world. Nothing is ever going to hurt you ever again. I promise."

"You *can't* promise that!" Emilia wept, sounding exhausted and frustrated.

"I *promise*," Subaru said with emphasis. "Promises are important and I must keep my promises. I will never, ever allow anything to hurt you ever again. I am going to spend the rest of my life with one goal: to protect Emilia and keep her happy."

Emilia took a deep breath. "Subaru, I don't want you to spend your whole life caring for a cripple," Emilia whispered.

"We're going to make you better, Mili. We have plenty of medicine to hold back the curse. And I'm hunting down a talisman that can cure you completely."

"Subaru... maybe you should just bring me to Siros," Emilia whispered.

Subaru froze. "What?" He whispered in disbelief.

"Anri... might be willing to find me a nurse or something. And then... you wouldn't need to take care of me. You'd be free. You could go and do whatever you want," Emilia said in a broken voice.

"Emilia," Subaru said, struggling not to growl at her. "I will *never* leave you. Not ever. I don't care what happens. I don't care how bad things get. You and I belong together."

"But... I have nothing to offer you," Emilia said in a tiny voice.

"You have your love," Subaru said softly. "You still love me, don't you?"

Emilia face was streaming tears. She gave a tiny nod.

"Then that's all I need," Subaru held her close. "You're safe here now, Mili. I promise you, the whole world will know that anyone who threatens you has signed his own death warrant."

It was very late. Meili had long ago sought her bed. She had poked her head in only once, to ask if she could reclaim some of the pillows and blankets that Emilia had confiscated.

Emilia hadn't answered so Subaru said it was fine. Meili grabbed her pillows and blankets out of the fort and Emilia flinched back violently when she sensed Meili moving near her. Emilia wrapped herself around Subaru and trembled.

It had taken hours but Emilia had slowly calmed down. She spoke more rationally now and once had even ventured to tell a joke.

"Mili," Subaru said, standing up from the bed. "I think it's almost time for bed. But before we go to sleep, I need to head down to the lab and-"

"No!" Emilia shouted, making a desperate, blind grab for his arm.

"Mili!" Subaru said in shock. Emilia held on like a vice.

"Don't leave me alone, Subaru," Emilia whimpered, pressing her face hard against his forearm. "Please. Don't leave me alone..."

Subaru looked at her in shock and took a deep breath. "Alright," He said slowly. "I'll take you with me. I'll just... carry you down there."

Emilia gripped him tighter. "We need to leave here?!" Emilia whispered, sounding like a frightened child.

"We... aren't leaving the house," Subaru clarified, "Just this room."

Emilia looked uncertain what frightened her more. "I don't want to go..." She whimpered helplessly.

Subaru struggled for a moment. "Mili," He said gently. "You really do need the medicine and I need to keep cooking it. So either you can come down with me or I'll be right back after I make sure that it's still cooking. I could find someone to sit with you until I get back," He offered.

I'd hate to wake up Meili and ask her to do this but I know she'd understand.

I really do owe her a big present after all this...

Emilia thought it over. Finally, she closed her milky eyes in despair. "Please don't leave me, Subaru," She whispered.

"OK," Subaru said slowly. "So... you want to come to the lab with me?"

Emilia seemed to find this idea very daunting. She squeezed Subaru's arm with frightening intensity but finally, she nodded once.

"OK," Subaru said as if trying to soothe a frightened animal. He sat down on the bed beside her. "So what I need you to do is to let go of my arm. I'll pick you up and you can put your arms around my neck and I'll carry you down to the lab."

Emilia took a deep breath and slowly loosened her death grip on his arm. Letting go of him seemed to take all the courage she had.

Subaru gently lifted Emilia onto his lap and let her wrap her arms around him. She rested her head against his chest.

Subaru picked Emilia up and carried her toward the bedroom door.

She weighs nothing. I haven't stolen anyone's strength in days. She's just lost a ton of weight...

Subaru approached the top of the stairs.

Subaru cleared his throat. "Come on, Mili. Let's head down to the lab," He said, hoping that some context might be reassuring. He began to carry her downstairs.

Emilia took a ragged breath. "Subaru, I'm... sorry..." She whispered.

After helping Emilia go to the bathroom and wash up, Subaru gently set Emilia down on a soft chair in their room. He tried to step away but Emilia immediately grabbed his hand and held on with desperate strength.

Subaru looked at her with deep concern. He spoke very carefully, "Mili, I need to make the bed before we can go to sleep," Subaru said, looking at the bed which was not only unmade but very nearly destroyed by Emilia's prior fort building activities. "Can I leave you here for a minute?" Subaru asked uncertain if he was being patronizing or if Emilia would be genuinely frightened if he stepped away.

Emilia took a deep breath. She made a conscious effort to let go but the instant she started too, she gave a strangled whimper and she convulsively gripped Subaru's arm with bruising strength.

She burst into tears.

Subaru immediately sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms. "It's alright, it's alright," He assured her. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm sorry," Emilia whispered.

"Emilia," He said gently. "What's wrong?"

Emilia took a deep breath. "Subaru. I can't see."

Subaru frowned. "I know that."

"You don't know, Subaru," Emilia said in a voice as jagged as broken glass. "You *can't* know. I feel their hands every time that I breathe!"

"Whose hands?"

Emilia took a ragged breath. "The hands that dragged me out of the bed. The hands that pushed me down on the ground. The hands that... held me still for the *axe*," Emilia whispered. "I *know* that they're not there but... I can't *see* that they're not there! Whenever you're not with me, I can't help but be terrified that the hands are only a second away from grabbing me again! I can't see! Anything could be lurking for me in the dark and I'd never see it coming until they grabbed me! I know it doesn't make sense but I'm so afraid that I just can't stand it!"

Subaru held her tight. "It's OK," He whispered. "It's OK. We're going to figure this out. As long as we're together, we can do anything."

Emilia whimpered. "Subaru, please stop saying that..."

Subaru felt his breath catch in his throat.

He thought for a moment. It was easily three in the morning. Subaru couldn't bring himself to wake up Meili or the maids to help him make a bed. "Alright. Well, I need my hands free right now so... how about you climb on my back and I'll make the bed? That way you can be touching me the whole time."

Emilia took a few deep breaths but finally nodded.

Subaru turned around and Emilia climbed on his back.

Giving a person who couldn't use their legs a piggy-back ride was harder than Subaru had assumed. He needed to use one hand to secure Emilia's legs around him and the other hand to make the bed. This meant making the bed was a huge production but he finally pulled it off.

When the bed was more-or-less made, he gently deposited Emilia on the bed.

Subaru made sure that he held her hand the entire time he got undressed and then he slipped into bed beside her.

Subaru held her close for a long time. It took her forever to fall asleep. Even after she drifted off, Subaru sensed her body spasming regularly as if her dreams were trouble by thoughts of violence and violation.

Subaru stared up at the ceiling, his thoughts bleak.

Subaru woke up late the next morning to find Emilia wrapped tightly around him. Emilia had always been a snuggler but today was different, she was holding onto him as if afraid some unseen force might tear him away from her.

There was a gentle knock.

Subaru saw Meili standing by the open door.

Subaru looked at her awkwardly as he couldn't get up or indeed move right now.

Meili crept into the room. She leaned over and whispered into Subaru's ear. "Subaru, Big Sis didn't come to bed last night," She said with a terrified expression on her face.

Subaru closed his eyes. "Fuck me. I'm sorry, Meili. Elsa is off doing a job for me. I meant to tell you and I got distracted."

Meili looked greatly relieved. "That's OK, Subaru. It happens. When will she be back?"

"Probably not for a few days," Subaru admitted. "She had to go to Kararagi. Hey. Do you think you could do a job for me too?"

"Sure. What is it?"

Subaru quickly sketched out his plan and Meili's face turned aghast. "No!" She said.

He shrugged. "It's all that I can think of."

"Do I *have* to?" Meili whimpered.

Subaru took a deep breath. "*Please?*" He asked plaintively.

Meili closed her eyes and her face became resigned. "Fine," She grumbled. "I'll leave after breakfast."

"I left the letter I wrote last night and the money on the table with your other stuff," Subaru said quietly.

Meili sighed. "Should I even be surprised that you knew I'd give in?" She complained as she walked away.

"Hey!" Subaru called after her in a whisper. "Take Tasty! Don't try to go there riding a mabeast!"

Meili stopped short and if anything now she looked even more annoyed. "Do you really think I hadn't thought of that?" She said unconvincingly.

Toby showed up around lunchtime and Subaru met him at the door, Emilia cradled in his arms.

It did not escape Subaru just how silly he must look right now.

"Is *she* here?" Toby whispered, looking around fearfully. Two large men climbed out the wagon as well.

Subaru felt Emilia flinch at the sound of the unknown voice and his jaw tightened. "No. She's not here right now."

"That woman is a psychopath!" Toby hissed, holding up his arms. "Look at what she did to me!"

Subaru glanced at his forearms which had some minor scarring. "Keep your hands to yourself and that won't happen again."

"I was just trying to be friendly!" Toby protested.

Subaru sighed. "You're lucky I'm holding Emilia right now. Otherwise, *I'd* break your head."

Toby looked offended. "Alright. Where's the goods?"

"Down here," Subaru led them into the bulkhead and down into the basement, ignoring all the curious looks directed at Emilia.

Toby and his men all came down into the basement. "You'll be taking this," Subaru pointed at several large boxes of *Soma*. "That's forty kilos if you were curious."

Toby nodded.

The men worked quickly and then drove off in their wagon.

Subaru brought Emilia back upstairs and helped her sit down on a sofa in the sitting room.

"So," Subaru said slowly. "You must have a lot of questions about what's going on."

Emilia shook her head.

Subaru frowned. "You don't?"

"Why would I? I'm not good at understanding things, Subaru. Every time I try to help, I just make a mess of everything," She said, her tone all the more heartbreaking for being so calm and completely matter-of-fact.

Subaru looked aghast. "Emilia-"

"It's fine, Subaru," She said calmly. "I know that I can never measure up to you. I don't really mind it. I'm just sorry that you're forced to settle for someone like me..."

"Emilia!" Subaru protested. "I-"

"I know that you love me, Subaru," She cut him off again. "And I'm... so very grateful. I just... wish... things could be different."

Subaru held her close. His mind raced as he tried to think of something to say to start rebuilding her shattered ego. "Emilia," He said slowly. "You've had a horrible time of it. But this is as bad as it's going to get, I promise. From now on, things will only get better. We're going to fix your eyes, we're going to fix your legs, and you'll realize that you're so much better than you think you are."

Emilia laughed but halfway through it turned into a sob. "Subaru, maybe I should be grateful that all this happened to me. I finally have an excuse for being a useless failure!" She burst into tears.

Subaru held her tight as she sobbed into his chest and wondered what he should say.

The next morning, Emilia slept in but her grip on Subaru was looser than yesterday and he managed to sneak out of bed.

He headed downstairs to take care of a few things. If Subaru had been paying closer attention, he would have realized that the loose hand Emilia was holding him with was mirrored by the death grip her other hand had on the sheets.

Emilia was awake. But after two days of childish tantrums every time Subaru tried to walk a few feet away, she was determined to get past her trauma.

I may be useless but I can't be pathetic too! I need to be worthy of my Subaru!

But I just... can't take it!

I thought that I was helpless before Anri and I got captured because I couldn't walk and my magic was sealed. I was so naive.

I just can't get over the what happened. The loathing in everyone's eyes in Sanshi. Those rough hands that forced my head down on the block. That axe...

I never realized how terrifying an axe could be. The hands held me down on the hard ground. And they raised the axe over my head. They were going to slaughter me like a pig...

Being helpless in bed was bad enough but now I can't even see!

I can't see anything.

I know I'm somewhere safe but it's like... I can feel those coarse hands on my body every time I move! I can't help feeling like those hands are always just an inch or two away from me and that as soon as I let my guard down, they'll slam me back down on the block.

And this time the axe will fall.

Emilia ground her teeth and her eyes filled with tears. I know it doesn't make any sense but I can't help it! I can't see anything! There could be monsters all around me and I would never know it! When I put my hand out, I can't tell what's going to be there until I actually touch it!

I keep feeling like I'll stretch my hand out and those rough hands will grab me again!

I almost wish that they'd brought the axe down! I can't live like this! And Subaru can't live like this! I just keep finding new and better ways to disappoint him! He's gone from having a wife he had to be ashamed of, to one who was crippled with no magic, and now to one who's blind and hanging onto her sanity by her fingernails.

How high up is this room? If I found a window-still could I... pull myself over? Would it be... high enough? Would I... end this nightmare?

Or would I just break myself further but live through it and give Subaru more chores...

Emilia closed her eyes, picturing herself falling through the air into an unseen landing. She imagined her body breaking in a thousand terrifying ways and she knew that she wouldn't even be able to brace herself or tell how she would strike the ground.

I'm such a chicken.

Why didn't I ask Daddy to kill me when I cursed Subaru with the Frost flowers?

It would have been the best gift I could have ever given Subaru. It would have shown that at least once, I really did think about him before I thought about me...

Emilia clenched her teeth harder and buried her face in her pillow. She fought to ignore the sensation of those phantom hands brushing her body. It felt like just the slightest tickle, a movement of air as if someone nearby was moving quickly. Not touching her, not yet. But moving close enough that she could feel the breeze of their passing. Emilia could easily understand that she was just imagining it. But she still felt it. She felt it constantly and it was getting stronger all the time.

Her certainty that the hands were there just kept growing, no matter what she told herself.

Emilia fought to think about something, anything else. She tried to remember nights spent in Subaru's arms but the phantom hands corrupted her memories. Instead of Subaru, she felt the rough, calloused hands running over her most sensitive parts. The sensation was maddening. She could almost hear a faint promise that they would have fun with her before they killed her.

Emilia clamped her mouth shut, her breath coming out in painful gasps. She dug her nails into the sheets desperately trying to maintain control. Trying not to think about how anything and anyone could be just a hand span away from her and she would never know.

Finally, she just couldn't take it anymore.

"Subaru!" She screamed, tears running down her face.

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

It was a very long two days. Emilia's emotions ranged from terrified hysterics to venomous rants about how pathetic she was and Subaru had no choice but to manage both.

Even the slightest hint of frustration in his voice would send Emilia crashing onto another spiral of despair.

By the second day's end, Subaru was absolutely exhausted. He felt that he had accomplished nothing today to justify feeling tired but trying to keep Emilia from going into another meltdown was extremely emotionally draining.

As the sun set, the pair were sitting silently in their bedroom. Subaru was struggling to conceal his frustration and Emilia knew that she was helpless to avoid causing it.

Emilia's sharp hearing heard footsteps on the stairs and she instinctively tightened her grip on Subaru's arm.

She heard Subaru let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"I expect more of that liquor for this!" A girl's voice said petulantly. Emilia thought it was the girl who she'd been talking to the other day. She couldn't remember her name. The entire day was a blur to her.

Subaru chuckled. "I'll go shopping as soon as I can."

"Great. You need me for anything else?"

"No. You should get some sleep."

"You're leaving?" A soft voice said, sounding disappointed,

"Nah. I live here. It's just been a long day."

Emilia heard the girl walking down the stairs.

"Master...?" A soft voice said falteringly.

Subaru chuckled. "'Subaru' will be fine."

The room was silent for a moment. "Miss Emilia? What happened to you?" She asked quietly.

Emilia stiffened. The voice sounded familiar.

Subaru gently took Emilia's other hand and drew it toward the speaker.

Emilia whimpered and struggled to pull her hand back but Subaru wouldn't let her. He stretched her hand out with gentle but inexorably pressure.

Emilia felt a soft hand under hers and she flinched back as if she had touched something hot.

"Miss Emilia? What happened?"

Emilia's unseeing eyes widened. "Petra?"

"You're still wearing my bracelet," The girl murmured in surprise.

"Emilia," Subaru said quietly. "I've asked Petra if she would be willing to work for me for a while. She's going to stay with us and help me to take care of you, OK?"

Emilia's blind eyes flickered back and forth between the two voices.

"Emilia has been through a lot lately," Subaru explained to Petra. "She's had... a very rough time..."

"I can see that," Petra said sympathetically.

Subaru drew Emilia's hand back to Petra's hand and this time Emilia flinched less. After a moment, Emilia held Petra's hand as well as Subaru's.

The trio sat quietly for a moment.

"Petra, how's your mother?" Subaru asked.

"Much better. Thank you," Petra said warmly. "She's going to stay in Arlem for now but I promised to send her some of my earnings. She should be very comfortable from now on."

"I'm glad," Subaru said. "Let me know if I can help. Mili, Petra, and I are going to work together to take care of you from now on. So it should be a little easier on both of us."

Emilia's hold on Subaru's hand become a death grip. If she still had her mana to enhance her strength, she would have broken his hand easily.

Petra whimpered slightly, feeling the same pressure but she didn't try to remove her hand from Emilia's grip.

"That's why I wanted to ask Petra to come here," He continued patiently. "You trust Petra, right?"

Emilia didn't answer right away but she finally gave an abrupt nod.

"I promise I'll do my very best to take good care of you, Miss Emilia!" Petra swore.

Emilia took a ragged breath. "Emilia," She whispered. "Just Emilia, please."

Emilia drifted off to sleep shortly after that and Subaru and Petra stepped out of the bedroom.

"Thank you for coming, Petra," Subaru said. "You can't imagine what this means to me."

"I'm happy to help. Subaru, what happened to her since you left Arlem?" Petra asked.

Subaru sighed. "That's a very, very long story..."

Petra lowered her voice. "Meili told me about Taiyang."

Subaru heart stopped. *Shit! I was so desperate to get another pair of hands to help take care of Emilia I never realized that I'd need to justify Meili's escape from Taiyang! I didn't even think of giving Meili a story to tell Petra! I was just desperate and sent her off with a letter and a bag of gold coins!*

Subaru was groping for anything to say and coming up empty.

Petra looked annoyed. "That wasn't a particularly pleasant trick you played, Subaru," She scolded him. "I know that you needed to get Meili out of there quickly and so that nobody knew it was you but why do all that?"

What is she talking about?! Shit! I don't know what Meili told her!

"It was... the best I could come up with," Subaru said lamely.

Petra sighed. "Well. Thanks for the medicine, Subaru. You probably saved my mother's life! She felt much better the instant she took it."

Subaru hesitated. "I'm just sorry I couldn't do more," Subaru said, trying to be noncommittal.

"Any sightings of Capella?"

Huh? "Nothing... recent," Subaru said, wondering what he should say.

Petra sighed in relief. "So the plan worked? Capella is out hunting down 'Taiyang' and ignoring all of you?"

Oh. Now I get it. Meili must have told Petra that I invented Taiyang as a way of keeping Capella off balance and that I went to Arlem to rescue Meili because I found out that Capella was getting too close to tracking her down.

That's probably not the whole story that Meili told her but it's enough to work with. I'll ask Meili for the details tomorrow.

"So far, so good," Subaru replied. "'Taiyang' has built up a terrifying reputation and nobody knows that it's all smoke and mirrors. It's the only way that I could keep Meili and her sister safe."

Petra looked very cross. "I understand *why* you had to do it, Subaru but it still wasn't very nice of you! You scared me half to death! I thought that you were going to take Meili away and eat her or something!"

Subaru winced. *I actually do feel pretty guilty about scaring Petra. What's worse is that I was doing it deliberately. I was so angry after finding out that Roswaal had stolen the spirits that I was basically throwing a tantrum and Petra got the brunt of it.*

"I'm sorry, Petra," Subaru said sincerely. "But I needed you to believe it! I knew that Capella could come sniffing around at any time and if you weren't genuinely terrified, she might have been suspicious or even tried to interrogate you. I couldn't take the chance of her hurting you."

Alright... that was a huge ball of lies but at least they're lies motivated by real feelings...

Wait... What the hell did I just say?

Petra sighed. "It's alright, Subaru. I can't really stay mad at you after you saved my Mom's life. Twice. And then saved Meili's life. Twice."

Wow. That almost makes it sound like I did some good stuff on this world.

"Petra," Subaru said slowly. "You understand that Taiyang-"

"I won't say a *word*, Subaru," Petra said. "I know that you're trying to distract your enemies and I don't want to do anything to disrupt that. Besides, it's a maid's responsibility to keep her master's secrets," She added primly.

Petra, you've been spending way too much time around Ram...

"Alright but please don't say anything about Taiyang to Emilia. She's been through so much already. I really don't want her to worry."

Petra nodded.

"One more thing, Petra," Subaru sighed. "I may need to leave sometime over the next couple of days. Some of the people I'm involved with have a lot of problems and I need to try to help fix them. I may be gone for a few days."

Petra smiled at him. "If anyone can help them, you can, Subaru."

Subaru felt almost ashamed by Petra's faith in him. "Well. Here's hoping," He replied.

Subaru hesitated and then took a deep breath. "Please take good care of Emilia while I'm gone. She's my whole life."

Petra nodded solemnly. "I'll take very good care of her, Subaru. I promise."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Subaru," Chandler said ebulliently the next night. Chandler was a goat demi-human with massive horns and a short goatee. His knees bent backwards and his feet were hooves. "You have my gratitude for pulling me out of a... rather unpleasant situation."

"You understand the terms of your stay here?" Subaru asked pointedly. They were meeting in a room in Koi's basement that straddled the line between bedroom and jail cell.

"Oh yes! I need to create some special documents for you. Perhaps for some property dispute?"

Subaru pulled out two sheets of paper. "I need a single copy of the first and fifty copies of the second message," Subaru said, handing it to him. "You'll find samples of the necessary handwriting here," Subaru tapped a pair of folders on the desk.

Chandler pulled out the paper and read it.

His face paled. "Oh my," Chandler whispered. "This is rather... more intense than the jobs that I usually get involved with..."

"You'll start immediately," Subaru said. It was not a question.

"Um," Chandler hesitated. "I'm not sure-"

"Don't worry. I'll make sure that you're provided with any resources you need," Subaru said pleasantly. "And should there be any trouble, just remember, Lady Koi is sleeping *right* upstairs..."

Chandler's eyes bulged. "*Lady Koi?*" he whispered. Apparently Chandler hadn't forgotten his attempts to double-cross her in the past.

Subaru stared at him, expressionless.

Chandler swallowed hard. "I'll start right away, Master," He said in an unsteady voice.

A few days later, the Black Silver Coins had a meeting at Koi's manor.

There weren't any real problems at the moment so the only thing that really came out of the meeting was Subaru rewarding his bosses with a Year each for their loyalty and Cynthia asking Subaru to increase production once again.

Weird. I'm suddenly making more gold than I know what to do with.

If nothing else, I won't have any trouble paying Petra's salary.

After Cynthia had left, Subaru asked Koi and Senko to stay behind and discuss something.

"As I mentioned previously, I want you ladies to begin to stockpile large amounts of nonperishable food and low-skill weapons like crossbows," Subaru began.

Senko and Koi both sat there looking curious.

"There's about to be a war in northern Gusteko," Subaru explained. "As well as a trade embargo as soon as I can set it up. I'm going to dispatch Elsa and Meili to disrupt supply lines to the army. Once that happens, the soldiers will respond by confiscating food from the peasants and the gentry. There are going to be a lot of hungry people up north. They'll pay a lot for food."

"I hadn't heard about any war!" Senko said in surprise.

"That's because I haven't arranged it yet," Subaru sighed.

Koi stroked her delicate chin. "Forgive me, Master but can these people afford to buy food? The peasants in the northern provinces are fairly poor."

"They'll be able to afford it once they steal some gold," Subaru replied. "The peasant revolt is going to be pillaging a lot of mansions in the near future. I'm going to make the peasants very angry and then you're going to sell them those crossbows at cost. They'll steal money from the nobles and they're likely to spend it all on food, clothing, weapons, and other necessities which you'll sell to them at a markup. You'll make your money back and then some. That's how we're going to out earn Scrofa!"

Koi's jaw dropped. I'll make a fortune if this goes the way that Taiyang plans! The army will certainly commandeer the peasants food when they run short and then the peasants will be desperate and starving. The peasants may be penniless for the moment but once the fighting breaks out and they start raiding noble estates they'll have the gold to buy food. And the army will in turn take that food forcing them to buy more! Even the nobility will be going hungry and lining up to buy food from me.

This is second or maybe third fortune that Taiyang has handed me in as many weeks! Where has Taiyang been all my life?

Maybe I should encourage Senko to set her cap for him after all...

"Do you understand the plan?" Subaru said pointedly.

Koi started. "Oh! Of course, my Master!" She said with a low bow that Senko mimicked. "Your generosity truly knows no limits. Even when ordering me to work your will, you still offer me fantastic possibilities for personal gain and profit."

"I'll be taking ten percent of those profits by the way," Subaru added.

"Of course!" Koi replied. *Ten percent is a pittance in this business. Most bosses take twenty at least from their underbosses. I doubt that there's any way Taiyang doesn't know that. He's simply being charitable. Not that I'm complaining.*

"Senko, did you handle that paperwork for me?" Subaru asked.

Senko nodded. "As you requested, Master," Senko handed him several sales orders, revealing that large amounts of expensive chemistry equipment and supplies had been delivered to a small house a good distance outside of Ivada. The recipient was listed as one 'Al Freid Nobel.'

Senko continued, "An agent of mine purchased the house anonymously and we're ready to act on your order."

Subaru inspected them quickly. "Perfect. Good work, Senko," Subaru said.

Subaru returned to the guest house only to hear giggling from outside. He looked around the corner and his jaw dropped. The yard was covered with mabeasts. Meili and Petra laid on top of a pair of Guiltylowe, laughing their heads off.

"Subaru!" Petra shouted with a huge grin. "I'm riding a Guiltylowe!"

"I can see that," Subaru murmured. "Where's Emilia?"

"Oh, she'd fine, Subaru," Petra replied. "She's taking a nap so Meili invited me out to play with her friends."

Subaru glanced at Meili, noting that Petra had clearly jumped exponentially in her opinion by being so fascinated by her Guiltylowe.

Later that night, Koi and Subaru were talking in Chandler's 'room.' Chandler claimed that he had finished the job and that he was ready for it to be inspected.

"Any word?" Subaru asked Koi as Chandler fussed with the last page.

"Cynthia claims that these radicals are being difficult," She admitted. "They're offering us four hundred gold pieces and they say that's their final offer. Should I lower the price?"

Subaru thought about it for a second then shook his head. "Five hundred is the offer. I want them to dislike us."

"But, Master," Koi murmured. "We *want* them to succeed and we don't need the money."

"If we make it too easy for them, it will make them suspicious," Subaru answered. "We don't want them to think of us as allies. We're just cut-throat merchants. That way, they'll put us out of mind quickly."

Koi thought it over then nodded.

"Excuse me?" Chandler called. "I believe I'm ready."

Subaru walked over to the desk Chandler sat at and looked at the sheets of paper he was handed.

"It went splendidly," Chandler said proudly. "Definitely some of my best work."

Subaru triggered *Reason and Judgment* and studied the letters that Chandler had forged. He saw nothing obviously false, either in penmanship or diction.

Subaru restarted time.

"Are you pleased?" Chandler pressed.

"It's... satisfactory," Subaru replied distantly. Subaru passed the sheet of paper to Koi. "You know what to do with this," He whispered.

Koi nodded. "Cynthia will have it by tomorrow night."

"Then I'll just be leaving," Chandler said cheerfully, getting up from his desk.

"You're not going anywhere," Subaru disagreed.

Chandler blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You're not going *anywhere* until your work has been 'accepted' by our 'clients.'"

Chandler looked outraged. "That's outrageous! We had an agreement! You have no right-"

Subaru grabbed Chandler by the throat and slammed the astonished goat man against the wall. "Listen to me. If your forgeries pass inspection, then you are free to go," Subaru said through clenched teeth. "But if there is even the *slightest* flaw then I will wrap you up in a ribbon and hand you to Koi myself and I will *pump* you full of enough amphetamines and coagulants to make sure that she can take her time killing you!"

"Ah!" Chandler gasped. "Alright. Alright! They will pass! I promise you."

Subaru pulled Chandler close enough for their breath to mingle.

Chandler's eyes bugged out of his head as he gasped for breath. "They... *will*... pass!" Chandler breathed.

Subaru dropped Chandler on the ground and left the room.

Koi leaned against the wall looking at Chandler speculatively. The goat demi-human looked up at her in terror. Koi had no idea what 'amphetamines' or 'coagulants' were but she was intrigued by the concept all the same.

The next night, Cynthia had an audience with Vlad an Voivode. They walked through the weed-choked ruins of the Voivode castle. After centuries of warring with damn-near everyone, the castle had been reduced to ruins. Only a little over a quarter of it was still habitable. The Voivode family had simply moved all their possessions into the remaining area and let nature reclaim the rest. Cynthia and Vlad were walking through a large topiary where dozens of statues had been engulfed by ivy and other creeping plants. A servant trailed far behind them, just in case they needed anything.

Vlad an Voivode, a huge man with flaming red hair, walked beside Cynthia. His face was twisted in frustration and he was grinding his teeth.

"I don't like extortion, bitch!" Vlad snapped.

Cynthia simply shrugged. "I resent your implication! I came here in response to your request. *You* asked me to use my resources to obtain any information I could about Siros's plans. I managed to oblige you, at *considerable* expense I might add, and you had promised to recoup my losses if I was able to provide you with the evidence. Now, I'm offering to fulfill our deal. I would make your decision expeditiously if I were you, however. The life-expectancy of some secrets can be numbered in hours. If you want it, you really should take it quickly." Cynthia was not overly concerned about Vlad's rage. She had been dealing with Vlad for years and they'd had a decent working relationship.

Vlad pounded his fist into his other hand. "Alright," He growled. "Three *hundred* gold coins and not a copper more!"

Cynthia reached into her pocket and handed a piece of paper to Vlad.

Vlad read it slowly, his eyes visible moving over the short missive.

Cynthia watched his eyes bug out. "Bullshit!" He roared.

"I thought you'd find that interesting," Cynthia commented.

"There's no way that Kairei is stupid enough to attack me!" Vlad shouted.

"She did defeat Sanshi," Cynthia observed. "It might not be as stupid as you claim. Especially once she's able to gather her strength and deploy it all against you."

Vlad gaped at her. For a moment he looked so furious that Cynthia worried that he might actually strike her. Then Vlad seemed to consider her words and he growled faintly.

Vlad shook his mane furiously. "Get out of here! And if you say a word about this, I'll have your head mounted on a pike!"

"And my money?" Cynthia asked calmly.

Vlad gestured dismissively toward the servant following them.

Vlad's servant hurried up to Cynthia. "This way, lady Cynthia. I'll arrange your payment immediately."

Before Cynthia was quite out of sight, Vlad gave a roar of fury. He drew his axe and started swinging at a small, thorny shrub nearby. Vlad hacked at the springy bush until he'd knocked off all its foliage but the tough, springy bush kept jumping around and the shaft wouldn't cut.

Cynthia looked over her shoulder and smiled as she was led away.

Three days later, Subaru was called to an emergency meeting in Siros. Subaru had told Anri that he had decided to go into business with Senko and that if she needed to get in touch with him, the merchants of the 'Inari Trading Company' would know where he was. Subaru and Senko had greased a few palms in Siros and gotten a Master Merchant's license for Senko and permission to open a shop there. They'd also managed to avoid involving Anri in the matter which pleased Subaru although the price of the license had been extravagant.

Subaru found Anri, Radu, and Gustov in the conference room. Anri looked frantic. "Subaru! You'll never believe what happened!"

Subaru sank into a chair with a sigh. "What now? Are the Demi-Humans rebelling? Is the Divine Dragon attacking Gusteko? Did the Witch of Envy break loose?"

Anri opened her mouth and then hesitated. "Damn, Subaru. That imagination of yours is an absolute curse, isn't it?"

"It's been a long couple of weeks," He admitted. "Let's skip the guessing game. What's going on?"

"Vlad an Voivode has attacked Siros!" Anri cried.

Subaru blinked. "He did?!" He asked in genuine surprise. *Wow. I know I set this situation up but I expected him to make threats and demand an investigation, not just immediately attack on such flimsy evidence. Is he really that dumb?*

Anri nodded. "His men attacked some villages in northeastern Siros. There were... heavy casualties..."

Subaru bit his lip. "This isn't your fault, Anri. Nobody could have predicted this happening," Subaru said firmly, uncertain of who he was trying to convince.

"Luckily, our soldiers were nearby," Gustov broke in, "And they were able to push Vlad's men back."

"Then we got even more bad news!" Anri said in exasperation.

"What?" Subaru said in surprise.

Anri started to explain but she struggled to find the words. Finally, she gave up and handed Subaru a piece of paper. Then she buried her face in her hands.

Subaru read the letter and his jaw dropped. The missive was so absurd that Subaru actually read it three times just to convince himself that this wasn't one of the letters that he had ordered fabricated.

"Anri," Subaru said plaintively. "Am I reading this right?!"

Anri sniffed. "If you read that the Hierocracy wants to put me on trial for 'disrupting the natural order' then you read it correctly."

"Technically, it's not the Hierocracy," Gustov amended. "Just the radical faction of the Church headed by Patriarch Subata."

"Uh," Subaru interjected. "Can they *do* that? I mean, they're just a *part* of the Hierocracy. Can they really issue a binding proclamation?"

"Binding' is debatable, Subaru," Anri answered. "The Gusteko Hierocracy experiences long periods of paralysis and that encourages Patriarchs to strike out on their own and form factions. How 'binding' a proclamation is, largely depends on how many provinces decide to enforce it."

"Fortunately, it appears that the bulk of the Hierocracy refused to sign off on this," Gustov continued. "Only Subata's radicals signed."

"Hardly a surprise," Anri rolled her eyes. "Those arch-conservatives vote not to seat our Patriarchs every year unless we first accept censure for our crime all those centuries ago!"

"Obviously, you're going to ignore this demand, right?" Subaru asked.

"You mean, am I going to surrender myself to a kangaroo court where I've already been explicitly assured of the verdict?" Anri asked. "No, I wasn't planning on it!"

"The church senses that the power-structure of Gusteko is destabilizing," Radu worried. "Ever since we conquered Sanshi the entire country has been on edge. The northern provinces are demanding to know why we couldn't leave well enough alone."

Subaru snorted. "'Well enough?'" He asked incredulously. "Yeah. Everybody except the people on the bottom were happy with the way things were. Then the folks who'd been kicked to the curb stood up for themselves and now folks are unhappy with the disruption in their safe, comfortable lives. Tale as old as time."

"Subaru," Anri said intently. "I don't know what to do. There's a real chance of Brokvar, Hilde, Craite, and Voivode uniting against us and if that happens-"

"Anri," Subaru cut her off. "That's *going* to happen."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything that I've heard so far suggests that these people view you as subhuman. They're going to try to put you back in your place. We'll just make sure that it won't go well for them."

Anri's face was grave. "Subaru, do you really think that we can weather storm against all four provinces?"

Subaru burst out laughing.

Anri pulled back, looking very affronted.

Subaru noticed her expression and checked his laughter. "Oh. You were serious," He murmured. Subaru cleared his throat. "Yes, Anri. I am completely sure that not only can you weather the storm but you'll emerge as the undisputed strongest House in Gusteko. Those northern Houses are clueless. This is a terrible time for them to attack."

Radu and Gustov shared a dubious look. "Lord Subaru," Gustov murmured. "Perhaps you would consider enlightening us?"

Subaru sighed. "OK. First of all, you should send a message to Griest telling him to close the northern border. The only people allowed to cross are registered as Siros or Sanshi citizens."

"What will that do?" Anri asked.

"The northern provinces need goods from the south. They're not self-sufficient countries, they depend on trade to survive. Every time that goods pass through another

pair of hands, the price doubles. Forcing Siros and Sanshi merchants as intermediaries in all northern commerce will skyrocket prices in the north while at the same time, swelling your coffers."

Anri digested that. "What will happen to the merchants who come north to Siros but are forbidden to travel on?"

Subaru shrugged. "They'll pout. They'll scream. Then they'll either sell their goods here or they'll take their goods home. The local merchants will step up in a few weeks and bring the surplus goods north for a nice profit."

"If the prices surge, the northern peasants may not be able to buy all those goods at all," Radu argued.

"Right. Then the goods hang around Siros and Sanshi and drive the price of goods down, allowing the local peasants and townsmen in Siros and Sanshi to rebuild now that the war is over."

Anri frowned. "What if the northern princes retaliate by closing their own borders?"

"We couldn't be that lucky," Subaru chuckled.

"Huh?"

"Them closing the borders means that instead of goods just being expensive, they'll be completely unavailable. That will not make the princes popular with the peasants or the nobility and they'll be staring down a rebellion in short order."

"Then what?" Anri asked.

"I doubt that the northern provinces will be willing to attack Sanshi at that point. But you'll want to have forces ready to secure your northern border just in case they try again. You'll also need to send a missive to the full Hierocracy asking for them to provide arbitration of your dispute."

"A sound idea, young Subaru," Gustov interrupted apologetically. "But I'm afraid that is utterly futile. Until the Holy King dies and a new one is crowned, the church is all but paralyzed. And none of the splinter groups are likely to come to our aid in any case."

"I know that," Subaru said with a rueful chuckle. "We're just moving the church into position for our 'attack,'" He smirked. "Anyway, while you're sabotaging the northern houses economically and trying to demand the Hierocracy of the Church to get off its ass and do its job--"

Gustov winced at this expression.

"-I'll deal with any armies that they gather. I'll play the same game I did with Sanshi: cut their supply lines and force them to fall back. Armies are very expensive. After a few weeks of marching back and forth trying to reach Siros without a solid supply line, they'll be struggling to make ends meet. Their soldiers will be tired and hungry. The peasants will be furious because the armies keep stealing their food and the prices in the north have skyrocketed. Then you can start to negotiate with the other Princes from a position of unassailable strength."

Anri, Gustov, and Radu shared a long look.

"It's not... a bad plan," Radu admitted.

Anri considered it gravely and then nodded.

Subaru sighed. "Alright. I'll go prepare to get to work. It looks like I have a long couple of months ahead of me."

That same night, Argus an Craite, Donar an Hilde, Patrick and Brokvar, and Vlad an Voivode meet in a small room in the palace in Hilde. Vlad had his right arm in a sling and he seemed visibly furious about that.

Donar slammed his aged fist down on the conference table with a thump. "Are you a *complete* fool?" He growled at Vlad. "You've started a war!"

"I've prevented a war! Or at least delayed it!" Vlad shouted back.

"By attacking unprovoked?!" Donar roared. "What madness motivated you to do this without even a discussion?!"

"Discuss what, old man?!" Vlad shouted back, leaping to his feet. "Should I have taken the evidence to Kairei and ask her if she'd like to discuss it?!"

"Evidence?! What evidence?" Donar shouted. "This scrap of paper?! Did you even try to have it verified?! Did you ask an expert to compare handwriting samples?! Where did you get this?!"

Vlad sunk back into his chair with a sullen look on his face. "From an old ally," He said quietly. "A very reliable ally."

Donar's head sank into his hands. "The madness of these days! Is everyone *trying* to destroy the kingdom?!"

Argus grabbed his shoulder. "Old friend, we don't have time to mull over Vlad's idiocy right now."

"Hey!" Vlad shouted.

Argus ignored him. "We need to focus on what to do next," He continued. "And what *Kairei* will do."

Patrick gnawed at a finger. "If Kairei wanted to attack Voivode, I'm not sure that I could blame her."

"What?!" Vlad exploded.

"Except it isn't that simple," Argus growled. "There's only two ways into Voivode territory: through Sanshi and through Craiteland and Hilde. If Kairei tried to attack through Sanshi, she'd fighting up into the mountains. It would be suicide."

"You think she'd try to attack through our lands?" Donar asked skeptically. "That would mean violating *both* of our territories just to pick a fight with Vlad. Surely, Kairei wouldn't be so foolish."

"Would it be foolish?" Argus grumbled. "If I were Kairei, I'd be pretty certain that Vlad had our blessing to attack. After all, his men did travel through our territory and we didn't say a word."

"They sneaked through our territory, you mean!" Donar said, looking daggers at Vlad.

Vlad snorted and rolled his eyes.

"If you were Kairei, would you believe that?" Argus asked pointedly. "Even if the evidence Vlad found is fake, she clearly has territorial ambitions. Her forces are all gathered on my southern border."

"Likely just to protect against further incursions," Patrick pointed out.

"Maybe," Argus admitted. "But maybe not. Frankly, I'd feel more comfortable if you would all gather some extra troops in my lands as a deterrent. At least until everything calms down."

The next morning, Subaru said goodbye to Emilia.

"I'm really sorry, Mili," Subaru said as they sat in the bedroom. "I'm going to need to be gone for a few days. But it's really important. Not only will this help Anri but it will get us the treasure we need to make the medicine to cure you."

Emilia took several deep breaths. "I'll be fine, Subaru," She said in a fragile voice but she was clearly giving it her all to act cheerful. "Petra is here. And Senko might pop by again."

Petra was setting up the small table in their room for breakfast. She paused long enough to nod enthusiastically. "We'll have lots of fun while you're gone, Master Subaru."

Emilia actually laughed. "*Master* Subaru. It just doesn't sound right, does it?" She asked fondly.

Subaru shrugged. "I think I'm starting to get used to it."

Petra continued. "Senko brought us lots of books and games so we should have plenty to do while you're gone."

Subaru sighed. "I know, Petra. Thank you. I don't think I could bare to leave here if I didn't know you were here keeping Mili safe."

Petra blushed.

Subaru wrapped his arms around Emilia. "It'll just be a few days," He promised. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Emilia hugged him tight. "I'll be fine until you get back. Please give Anri my love."

Subaru made a face. "Well, I don't think I'll actually *see* Anri on this trip. I'm just helping her," He said evasively. "But I'll tell her when I see her," He said with a sigh.

Emilia bit her lip. "And... you're taking *Elsa* with you?"

"That's right," Subaru commented. "Is something wrong?"

Emilia's face twisted with indecision. She adored Meili in spite of the girl's strangeness but no matter how nice Elsa acted, Emilia would *never* forgive her for nearly killing Subaru. It was on the tip of Emilia's tongue to warn Subaru to keep a sharp eye on the assassin and make sure she didn't try to hurt him again but her own doubts stilled her warning.

Emilia knew that her judgment was pathetic and that anything she could possibly think of had long ago been considered by Subaru. Finally, she just decided to hold her tongue. Emilia had learned over the years that bad things happened. But if she stayed quiet and didn't try to do anything, then at least those bad things wouldn't be her fault.

"It's nothing," Emilia whispered.

Before Subaru, Meili, and Elsa left, they check in with Koi.

"Everything go as planned?" Subaru asked.

Koi grinned. "Perfectly, Master," Koi purred. "The fools accepted the entire shipment. They resisted our fee at first but finally they agreed. Senko has laid down a flawless paper trail as well."

Subaru nodded. "Excellent work, Koi. And Senko too. I'm heading up north to take advantage of this."

"I'd wish you luck, Master," Koi said smoothly. "But I'm well aware that you're beyond such trivial concerns. Tell me, Master. Do you believe you will acquire more Years on this mission?"

"Several hundred with any luck," Subaru said matter-of-fact. "And yes, Koi. As I have taken careful note of you and your daughter's loyalty and ability, several of these Years are earmarked for you."

Koi grinned and bowed low. Her face was impassive but her tail twitched eagerly.

Patriarch Subata of Combë stood in the center of the Aberdeen Cathedral in southern Craitland, not far from the Siros border.

Patriarch Subata was an old man who was made of nothing but skin and bones. He seemed swallowed up by his red ecclesiastic vestments.

Nearly a hundred other Patriarchs lined the stone seats of the great meeting hall in the apex of the Cathedral. Many of them had been Subata's political allies for decades and they had all gathered here today to make a stand, even if the greater Hierocracy refused to.

"Is this everyone?" Subata asked his secretary, Brother Ucera.

"This is everyone who promised to attend, Your Eminence," Ucera said with a bow.

Subata nodded and approached the pulpit in the center of the room. "Let us not beat around the bush. We all know why we're here. The province of Siros has stuck out its neck too far this time. They have never been true children of the Church! Their heritage is streaked with dirty demi-human blood from Kararagi and Lagunica!"

This got a murmur of approval from the crowd.

"Give these knaves an inch and they take a mile," Subata thundered. "We must take action now before it is too late! Holy King Gilecomgain was a fool to be persuaded to reinstate them to the rolls of Gusteko!"

There was another murmur but this one was less supportive. Regardless of how any of the Patriarchs felt about Gilecomgain politically, he was still alive and he was Holy King. Subata sensed this and dropped that line of attack.

"Our Holy King reacted to the plight of Siros's people with mercy and forgiveness," Subata said soothingly. "He dared to hope that after centuries of exile and deprivation, the people of Siros might have learned proper behavior in the eyes of men and gods. The Holy King took a chance on them. And look at how they have repaid him!"

The response to *this* was much more enthusiastic.

"Demi-humans running rampant through Gusteko!" Subata shouted. "War in the southern provinces! Witches on the prowl throughout the lands! And now, Princes Kairei dares to ask the Church to intervene and mediate a settlement? I say no! The province of Siros must not be simply removed from the rolls of Gusteko once more. They must be dissolved! Cleansed! No root nor branch shall be spared from this culling! We must harry them from our lands until once again our people can exist in peace and safety and Gusteko is as the Gods envisioned it: a holy land, cultivated for the safety of humans everywhere!"

The Patriarchs cheered.

"If the Hierocracy is paralyzed then we will speak in its stead! We will call for a Holy War against Siros! All men of good conscience must take up the sword against these foul swine! And then there shall come at last a time of blessed peace!"

Then the world ended.

Subaru, Elsa, and Meili sat on a blanket on a hill some distance from the Aberdeen Cathedral. Meili's mabeasts sheltered in a forest nearby. Aside from that, they could have been any other small family out on a picnic.

"What are we doing here exactly?" Elsa asked, knitting a doll.

Subaru shrugged. "Mostly just making sure that this thing gets done. Also, you'll never see something like this again. Hopefully," He added. "So you make as well take in the spectacle."

"And after this, we head up north and pick off the supply wagons again?" Meili asked.

"That's the plan," Subaru answered.

"Huh. It's almost like we're ending up back where we started again," Meili mused.

Subaru shook his head. "Not even close, Meili. We might be doing some of the same things but we've all come a long way since then." Subaru hesitated. "We've... become friends," He said.

Meili's eyes widened. "You mean it?"

Subaru chuckled. "Of course, I do. I mean, you're both absolutely fucking insane and a pair of mass murders but... hell, who am I to talk? I've lost track of how many people I've killed since I came here! I'm waging a whole war for my own profit! So, yeah. I mean, I think of you as friends. I don't know how you think of me. But... you've done right by me. You've earned my loyalty. As far as I'm able, I'll always try to do right by you."

Meili frowned. "Your *loyalty*?"

"Yeah."

"Isn't loyalty... something you show to your boss?"

Subaru snorted. "It's a two way street unless your boss is shitty."

"I was thinking of Mother," Meili explained.

"As if by example," Subaru snorted. "Capella never cared about loyalty. She just wanted your obedience."

"What's the difference?" Meili said.

Subaru thought for a moment. "Obedient is when someone does what you want because they fear that you'll punish them. Loyalty is when someone does something for you when you have nothing to offer or threaten them with. Obedience is commanded. Loyalty is earned."

Meili frowned and pondered that for a moment. Then her eyes widened. *He's right. We were 'obedient' to Mother. We hated her. We feared her. As soon as the faintest possibility of escaping her came up, we seized it with both hands and never looked back.*

But Subaru... I'm not afraid of him. I mean... I know that he could kill me easily but I also know that he won't. He might not even kill me if I gave him a reason to. He's never punished us, even though he could have. He's been kind to us. Kinder than he had to be.

Meili and Elsa shared a look and Meili was sure that they were thinking the same thing.

Subaru has our loyalty, Meili thought with something like amazement. Subaru... earned our loyalty. If Lye or someone showed up and offered to set us 'free' of Subaru, I'd warn

Subaru. Even if he lost his power, even if he had no way to help me or protect me, I'd still want to help him. I care about him. Like Big Sis.

Meili opened her mouth to share this remarkable revelation but before she could, the mother of all thunderclaps erupt from the cathedral far in the distance.

Meili watched in shock as the massive structure blew apart into shattered beams and crumbling stone and quickly collapsed in on itself.

"Huh. You were right. I've never see anything like that," Elsa murmured. "What do you call that stuff?"

"Dynamite," Subaru murmured.

"Well, it was worth the wait, I must say," Elsa said.

"Remember, remember, the fifth of November," Subaru muttered.

Meili frowned. "What does that mean?"

Subaru blinked and thought about. He even triggered *Reason and Judgment* but the words he had just said meant nothing to him.

"I... don't know. I don't know... why I said that," Subaru admitted.

Meili gave him a worried look.

Subaru cleared his throat, stood up and stretched. "Well, we're done here for now. What do you guys say we go hit up a bar?"

"Great!" Meili cheered.

Subaru laughed. "I'm raising a delinquent here!"

Meili looked up at Subaru quizzically. "You let me kill people for you but my drinking is what pricks your conscience?"

Subaru burst out laughing. "Thanks for that, Meili! That makes me feel so much better!"

The trio walked away from the hill.

"We'll meet up with Koi's people in the morning. They'll help us make the wagons disappear. And they'll spread those forged church documents that Chandler made through the north."

"Subaru!" Anri shouted as he walked into the council chamber a few days later. "Thank you for coming so quickly!"

Subaru frowned. "Um. Did you call me?" Subaru asked.

Anri blinked in confusion.

Subaru shrugged. "If you sent me a message, I didn't get it. I was just in the neighborhood."

Anri sighed. "Well, it was good luck anyway. We have an emergency."

"An emergency?!" Subaru asked, sitting down. "I thought the war was going great for us! So far, nobody has been willing to attack Siros at all!"

"It's not the war," Radu interjected. "There was a terrorist attack in northern Gusteko. A cathedral was attacked."

Subaru frowned for a moment. "That's terrible and all," He said without much concern. "But how does that affect us?"

"Subaru," Anri whispered. "The cathedral wasn't *just* attacked. It was obliterated. It was like some foul act of witchcraft."

Subaru squinted at her. "I got to admit that I'm skeptical of that, Anri. People just yell witchcraft if they don't know what happened. Also, why do we care if something in an enemy province gets blown up?"

"Because who knows if those terrorists will attack us next?!" Anri pointed out. "We could be blown up!"

Subaru thought that over and shrugged. "What do we know about these guys?"

Gustov sighed. "A Craiteland splinter group who calls themselves 'The True Way' have taken credit for the attack."

"What do they want?" Subaru asked.

Gustov shook his head. "They're a group of antihierarchical radicals."

"Antihierarchical?" Anri repeated.

Gustov nodded. "They hate the Hierocracy. They blame the church government for most of Gusteko's social and political problems. They want to see the Hierocracy disbanded and for individual Patriarchs make ecclesiastic decisions for their own districts."

"Guessing the church doesn't like them too much," Subaru commented.

Radu shook his head. "They've been suppressed several times over the years but they never did *anything* this aggressive before! Where did they even *find* this kind of power?!"

"A witch?" Anri suggested.

"Anri!" Subaru reprimanded. "The witches are *dead*! You sound like one of those superstitious Sanshi peasants."

"Sanshi swears that a witch has come back! They call him Taiyang!" Anri pointed out.

"I've heard," Subaru sighed. "He doesn't exist."

"How do you know that?" Anri asked.

"Because for one thing, at least half of the things that they're blaming Taiyang for, / actually did. There is no Taiyang. He's just an excuse for Sanshi to explain losing the war to a group they consider inferior."

Anri cocked her head and thought about that.

"We don't believe it was a witch in any case," Gustov sighed. "My Shadows managed to dig out some interesting information. Apparently, the terrorists purchased this weapon from an alchemist in Kararagi called 'Al Freid Nobel.'"

"Your shadows deserve a prize," Subaru commented.

Gustov squinted at him. "Thank you," Gustov said in confusion.

"Can we find him? We need to question him." Anri said.

Gustov shook his head. "Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, a few days ago, his home blew up in a similar explosion to the one that leveled the cathedral. Perhaps it serves him right for playing around with powers he could not control."

Anri thought for a moment. "I suppose that means the problem is solved," Anri said.

Subaru squinted at her. "...Maybe. Assuming that explosion really *was* an accident. And assuming he didn't give someone else the recipe for his explosive!" Subaru pointed out.

Anri's eyes widened. "That... is not a pleasant thought..."

Subaru shrugged. "There's nothing we can do about it right now. We'll just have to keep our eyes open and see what develops."

Anri nodded in agreement.

Subaru got up. "If you guys will excuse me, I really need to get home," He sighed. "I haven't seen Emilia in days."

Anri sighed. "Give her my love. Tell her I'm sorry that I've been so busy but I plan to see her again as soon as time permits," Anri said sadly.

Subaru stared at Anri for a moment. Her obvious guilt at neglecting Emilia melted his heart toward her, just slightly. "I will," Subaru said, giving her a friendly hug.

"Um. There is one more thing," Gustov murmured. "Unfortunately, I received some more information just before this council meeting. And... It's a doozy," He admitted.

"What is it?" Anri asked.

Gustov sighed. "Evidently, shortly before their deaths, Patriarch Subata and his faction issued a proclamation."

Anri rolled her eyes. "Wonderful. So what did they proclaim? That Siros is evil? That the House of Ithil are servants of the devil? That Siros clergy participate in wild orgies where they copulate with temptresses from the void beyond this world?"

"Hey," Subaru muttered. "Why don't you ever invite *me* to any of those parties?"

"Because Emilia would kill us both," Anri said without batting an eye.

Subaru chuckled.

"Yes to all of your questions," Gustov continued, "But there's more."

"What is it?" She asked.

Gustov groped for words and then shrugged. "Here. We managed to obtain a copy. Read it for yourself," Gustov said, pulling out a sheet of paper that was very familiar to Subaru and handing it to Anri.

Anri quickly read it and then her eyes bugged out. "This is *ridiculous*!" She gasped.

"Someone want to clue me in?" Subaru grumbled. "All I can see is that the handwriting is terrible."

Anri's eyes were huge. "The supply-line raids are starving the northern armies," Anri said in a shaken voice. "The armies are responding by seizing food from local villages."

"Anri, that's not your fault," Subaru said sympathetically. "They started this war. You didn't."

"I know that, Subaru," Anri said. "That's not the problem. The peasants have responded to these food shortages with... some small rebellions. Nothing more than large riots for the most part."

"OK," Subaru nodded. "I mean, you can hardly blame them."

Anri took a deep breath. "Patriarch Subata is claiming that since these peasants are acting to protect their food supply from the armies they are, in effect, sabotaging the war effort against 'the evil Siros' and therefore they are in defiance against the Church."

"Is *anything* not in defiance of the Church?" Subaru rolled his eyes. "Can you guys even go to the bathroom without prior approval?"

Anri ignored him. "Subata is now arguing," She whispered. "That any peasant who attempts to defy the army should be made an example of. He and his family should be seized and placed into bondage as slaves..."

"What?!" Radu shouted.

"That's just stupid," Subaru said.

"Grandfather," Anri whispered. "What's the reaction?"

"My Shadows report that the north is *boiling* tonight," Gustov said seriously. "Subata sent this proclamation out to most of his allies, who are all the kind of hardheaded reactionaries who might support this ridiculous scheme. But most of them were sensible enough to recognize this paper was the proverbial keg of lantern oil and they concealed it from the public. Some were *not* that intelligent and they ordered it copied and published as a threat against any more defiance from the peasantry."

Anri closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"The result is about what you would expect," Gustov admitted. "Rebellions have exploded all over the north and radical anti-church factions are springing up left and right."

"They'll be slaughtered," Anri whispered. "The peasants don't have any weapons!"

"Yes, they do," Gustov answered. "My people still don't know how but someone has been smuggling significant caches of weapons into the northern provinces. Particularly *crossbows*."

"Hm. Easy to use and they neutralize armor," Subaru muttered. "Those peasants might stand a chance after all."

Anri shook her head in disbelief. "Subaru, do you have any idea how those weapons are getting north?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I'd guess that some ambitious smuggler saw a way to make a huge payday when we closed the borders. Sell the peasants weapons at cost and then once they've stolen money from the nobles, sell them everything else at a hefty markup."

Anri pondered that for a moment. "It's hard to believe that smugglers can be that well organized..."

Subaru frowned. "I do have a few connections with local smugglers from back when I shipped supplies to you during the war," Subaru reminded her. "I could do a little digging for you if you want. Maybe we can find a few names."

Anri considered it then shook her head. "No, it doesn't matter now. Gusteko is on fire. Every other concern becomes secondary until we find a way to put it out."

"Any reactions in Siros?" Subaru asked.

Gustov shook his head. "Very minimal. Our people are pious but they're only considered provisionally part of the Holy Church. They tend to ignore Hierocracy proclamations. Especially ones *this* stupid."

"Well, that's good at least," Subaru said.

"Subaru," Anri murmured. "Do you think that there's anyway for us to end all this conflict before it tears the kingdom apart?"

Subaru stared at her for a long time. *Alright. Anri has been very useful. In spite of her screwing me and Emilia in the past. And I've effectively won Scrofa's challenge at this point. If I'm getting ready to wrap things up, I might as well ensure that Anri gets a payday out of it as well. That would make Emilia happy...* "There's one way. But you're not going to like it," He warned her.

Anri gave a helpless laugh. "I don't like any of it! I haven't liked any part of this since this whole mess started all those months ago!"

"Point taken," Subaru admitted. "Have you been sending those requests for a mediation to the Hierocracy like I asked you to?"

Anri rolled her eyes. "Yes. For all the good it's done us."

"What do you mean?"

Anri snorted. "We just sent our fourth request and we finally got a reply. The Hierocracy basically told me to stop bugging them and that they aren't interested in getting involved in our problems."

Gustov shook his head. "A truly shameful way for Patriarchs of the Church to speak."

"But useful," Subaru grinned. "Do you think that you can publicize that response?"

"Sure, but what good will that do?" Anri asked.

"Because, I think that it's time for you to 'reluctantly' proclaim yourself queen," Subaru said.

Three jaws hit the floor at the same time.

Anri recovered first. "Subaru, what are you talking about? The Hierocracy proclaims who rules."

"Except that they're not doing that," Subaru pointed. "They're not even establishing a *regency* in the Holy King's incapacitation. They want the world to adhere to their schedule. That's not how life works. The Church has openly, repeatedly, and *publicly* abdicated its responsibilities to preserve peace and tranquility in Gusteko. Someone needs to step up and end this destructive conflict. *Somebody* needs to be the adult in the room. And it might as well be you."

"The Church would never stand for it!" Radu scoffed.

Subaru laughed. "The Church doesn't have anything to say about it! Have you been paying attention? *Everyone* is furious at the Hierocracy. The peasantry in Siros blame the Church for their being excommunicated for all those years and the peasants in the north are openly demanding that the church do something, *anything* to rein in this destructive war and have been ignored. Now they think the church is poised to turn them all into slaves! If you tell a man that someone is planning to sell his wife and children, you get him very excited very quickly!"

"Subaru," Anri whispered. "You're talking about... a revolutionary change. All authority in Gusteko flows from the church."

Subaru looked thoughtful. "Nobles tend to think that lines of authority are set in stone but at the end of the day, most people just care about having a roof over their heads and good food to eat. The Church has pushed people too far. All it's going to take is a little shove to shatter those chains of authority."

Anri gave him a suspicious look. "Why do I get the funny feeling you had something to do with fanning anti-church sentiment in the north?" Anri murmured.

Subaru shrugged. "Because you know me and you know how I work. That said, I was expecting the northern armies to have a few riots they'd have to put down. Even I couldn't have foreseen how dumb Subata's faction would have to be to issue a proclamation like that. That's on them!"

The room was quiet for a long time, Radu and Gustov stared at Subaru in absolute shock.

Anri made a rueful expression. "I must admit, it's not... the worst idea I've ever heard," Anri ventured.

"Anri!" Gustov gasped.

"Grandfather, you've told me time and time again that the Church already has too much power in temporal affairs," She reminded him. "The papal authority has been growing unchecked for centuries and if somebody doesn't pull the Holy King up short, every prince in Gusteko will become little more than his vassal! I'm a true daughter of the Church, Grandfather but I won't kneel to the Holy King and receive my crown back from him in some contrived little ceremony that has no purpose other than my humiliation!"

Gustov just stared at her.

Radu and Gustov were both speechless.

Anri drummed her fingers on the table. "Alright then. How do we do this?"

"Start by issuing a proclamation of your own," Subaru suggested. "Make it clear how reluctant and regretful you are to have to take this step but someone needs to be the adult in Gusteko and stop the wars. You're proclaiming yourself Queen and if the other four Houses don't submit, then they'll be considered in rebellion and you *will* march into their territory and force them kneel."

Anri bit her lip. "Subaru, we'd be outnumbered-"

"Not as much as you think. The northern armies are in tatters. They have no supplies, their attention is divided due to the rebellions, and their morale is exhausted at this point. They can't weather an assault from Siros and the princes know it."

Anri thought that over.

Subaru continued. "I'd also recommend making public that recent response from the Church. It should really tick everybody off with how dismissive the church has been toward people's life-and-death problems. Take a few days and really polish this proclamation. It might be the most important decree of your life. Once you're ready to publish it, my people will ensure that it's also circulated throughout the north and that the peasantry are all in favor of it."

"Do you really think you can do all that?" Anri asked in disbelief.

Subaru shrugged. "Since coming to this world, I've discovered that manipulating public opinion is as easy as giving people a convenient target for their frustrations."

Anri nodded. "Alright. I'll start working on it immediately."

"Oh. One more thing. How's the food situation in Siros?"

Anri blinked. "Fine. We have plenty of food. With the northern borders closed, food is extremely cheap here."

"Yeah. I'd like you to extend an offer to the Church. Tell them that since your feud is with the northern nobility and not the peasantry, you're willing to ship a few thousand tons of grain north if the Church will vow to be the guarantor of it. Because the grain is to feed hungry peasants not soldiers and you don't want it misdirected."

"I doubt that the Church would agree to that," Gustov warned him.

Subaru chuckled. "I doubt they will too. And we can publicize that refusal as well."

Subaru walked out of the room.

"A very strange man," Radu noted.

"But a gifted one," Gustov replied. "Also, speaking of men, have you considered what we talked about yesterday?"

Anri sighed. "I'm not... ready to marry yet... And let's be honest. At the moment, there are very few options even on the table."

"Canmore-" Gustov began.

"Is *not* an option," Anri said flatly. "Malcolm an Griest won't even let Duncan marry Deann. He would never give permission for me to marry Canmore. Unless we want to threaten to *kill* Canmore if he doesn't," She added sarcastically.

Radu nodded. "I know you don't care much for most of the nobles-"

"That isn't the problem," Anri cut him off. "I always knew that I wouldn't love my husband," She added carelessly. "Gods, I always thought that romances like Emilia's only existed in books..."

Gustov nodded sadly. "Romance and love are rare things in royal marriages. The first concern is always alliance. The second concern is ability, hopefully to create gifted children."

Anri nodded. "I've occasionally thought about asking Subaru and Emilia if they would consider doing me a large favor..."

Subaru, Elsa and Meili were riding through the forest, discretely following a carriage.

"Any word from the north?" Subaru asked.

"You mean Chandler's papers?" Meili replied. "Oh yeah. Those are making all kinds of noise."

"Do people believe them?" He pressed.

Meili nodded. "I haven't heard of anyone questioning if they were genuine."

Subaru gave a sigh of relief. "Perfect. I was worried I was making a noose that would catch around our necks."

"Subaru," Elsa asked. "One question. What do we do about Chandler?"

"Hm," Subaru thought about it for a long while. He stared off into the distance. "Elsa," He said thoughtfully. "I've decided I *really* don't like loose ends."

Elsa smiled beatifically.

"Koi wants a piece of him too," Subaru mused. "Why not invite her to watch? That way you're both happy."

Elsa squealed. "I love having an audience!"

That evening, Cynthia was riding in a carriage toward Ivada for a conference. She first realized she had a problem when the carriage slowed down when they were only halfway there.

Cynthia took a deep breath and stepped out of her carriage to find her guards were completely surrounded by a legion of soldiers.

The leader was an enormous bear demi-human with a savage grin.

"Arktos," Cynthia murmured.

The bear demi-human chuckled. "Lovely to see you again, Cynthia. How long has it been? Ten years?"

"I forget," Cynthia murmured, her face pale. "I believe it was right after my Father and Brother died and when I asked for help to salvage their division, Scrofa suggested that I abandon the Coins and just get married and pump out a few children."

"You've got to admit. It was good advice," Arktos smirked. "If you'd done that, you wouldn't be in this mess right now."

The air suddenly became cooler and a chill wind blew.

Arktos's grin faltered.

One of his soldiers gave a cry of alarm as a shadow figure emerged from the forest. At his side was a beautiful woman, a young girl, and countless mabeasts.

"Honestly," Taiyang whispered. "I expected you to attack hours ago."

Arktos looked at the mabeasts for a moment, realized that his odds of escape were essentially zero and then drew his enormous claymore. "You knew about this?!"

"After losing his own wager," Taiyang murmured. "Scrofa had to do something. Logically he'd decide to prove that I couldn't protect my own people. Senko was no good as a target. She isn't even a member of the Coins. Koi wasn't a good option, even after all these years as an underboss, many still view her as an outsider. So I knew when Cynthia left for this conference, you'd attack her."

"Can I get started, Master?" Elsa cooed.

"Yes, yes," Taiyang said with a dismissive wave. "But I do have one special request..."

The round conference table was packed with men. They were almost all demi-humans and almost all of them were looking with pronounced dislike at a ponderous figure seated at the far end of the table. The pig demi-human was enormous, overflowing the comfortable chair he sat in.

"It's time for us to unite again," Scrofa said in a deep voice. "We've been divided for nearly two years. All kinds of outsiders are creeping into our organization."

"As far as I recall," Lepus muttered. "*You* were not invited to this gathering, Scrofa!"

Scrofa's snort sounded very much like an oink. "I invited myself. It's time for this matter to be settled."

"I feel like Taiyang might have something to say about that," Ailuro said. "I think we all remember that you lost your own bet to make more coin than Taiyang. You had at least double the resources that Taiyang possessed and he *still* out earned you by a two to one margin. I'm not sure that I like *anything* you're selling at this point."

"He was able to profit off a war!" Scrofa protested.

"Lucky him," Lepus shrugged. "It's still embarrassing that you managed to lose."

"We should wait for Lady Cynthia to arrive before proceeding," Ailuro agreed.

Scrofa smirked. "You'll be waiting a long time. You see-"

"Evening, all!" Cynthia said cheerfully, walking into the room with a bag under her arm.

Scrofa's jaw hit the floor.

"Sorry I'm late," Cynthia continued. "My Master had to deal with a little incident on the road. Arkτος popped in for a chat."

"Interesting," Lepus murmured, looking back and forth between Scrofa and Cynthia.

Cynthia walked over to Scrofa. "Master Taiyang is just itching to have a nice long talk with you, Scrofa," Cynthia continued in a cheery voice. "He even sent you a present."

Cynthia handed Scrofa the bag. Scrofa slowly reached in and pulled the contents out.

It was a bear skin.

Two days later, Scrofa was finally back in his mansion in Vollachia. He reclined on a couch in his private study with a glass of wine in his hand and rubbing his forehead. He had no illusions about what he'd lost. Scrofa had fled the meeting in fear for his life. He now had no chance of becoming King. His odds of even remaining in control of Vollachia were poor, much less Lagunica.

I need to do something to salvage this. Maybe I could fan some anti-witch sentiment? Only a few factions of the Black Silver Coins actually worship Typhon and the other witches. The rest of us see them as superstitious fools.

I can't make an accommodation with Taiyang now. After all this, he's going to try and make an example of me. I'll spend the rest of my life in hiding...

The study door opened.

Scrofa jumped. "Hey! What are you doing here! Who let you-"

Scrofa trailed off when he saw who his guests were. There was a beautiful woman, caressing a bloody knife and a little girl with a wolfgarm standing behind her. And that meant the the unassuming young man between them was...

"How did you find me?!" Scrofa gasped.

Taiyang shrugged. "We followed you, of course," He said. The young man walked into the room, ignoring Scrofa and looking through his shelves, studying Scrofa's precious treasures and antiquities.

"Followed me?!" Scrofa echoed incredulously.

"Yeah. For two days. How many times did you have to circle back on your trail anyway?" Taiyang grumbled. "We were all bored to tears."

Scrofa shook his head. "I don't get it!" He whimpered. "If you knew where I was, why didn't you just kill me?"

Taiyang didn't answer at first. "Ah!" he said in delight, looking at the Black Stone Scrofa had just recently bought from House Griest. Taiyang smashed his fist through the glass without scratching his skin and removed the bobble.

"Is that it?" The little girl asked.

"This is it!" Taiyang said with a foolish grin.

Scrofa took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Are... are you telling me you came all the way here... just for that?!"

For the first time, Taiyang looked at Scrofa. "Well, I hope you didn't think that *you* were important enough to get my attention."

Scrofa was speechless.

Taiyang walked out of the room without a backward glance. "We're done here. Elsa, feel free to enjoy yourself."

Elsa gave Scrofa a beatific smile and he felt all the blood drain out of his face.

"Any word about the northern armies?" Anri asked as they sat in her conference chamber.

"They appear to be running around in circles a great deal," Gustov replied. "My Shadows can't figure out what they're trying to do!"

"They're chasing shadows," Subaru quipped. "My people are *very* busy making sure that any supplies sent to the armies never get there. The forces of Voivode, Craite, Hilde and Brokvar are responding by seizing food from the communities in their own provinces to keep their armies eating. To further complicate things, there have been inexplicable uprising in the northern provinces. In *every* province, some surprisingly well-armed peasants are demanding reforms and threatening violence. On top of that, the treasuries up north are nearly empty. Marching armies around for weeks at a time is very expensive."

"Our forces have solidly rebuffed them from entering Siros," Radu added. "The armies of Siros remain at the border and they're apparently pretty comfortable there. I'm assured that morale remains high. The northern armies can't seem to get together for a pitched battle. All that we've had so far is skirmishes. Best of all, we haven't tried to advance into their territory. So we haven't broken any laws and given the Hierocracy an excuse to denounce us."

"The four Houses can't coordinate," Subaru explained. "Some of them refuse to push into Siros without solid supply lines and some want to charge ahead anyway. This is an army with four different commanders who aren't on the same page. They'll fragment apart soon if we keep up the pressure. The northern peasantry is *furious*. Prices are sky high, the soldiers are taking the food out of their mouths, and they feel like the war isn't accomplishing anything."

Anri thought for a moment. "Should we invite the princes to come negotiate?"

Radu and Gustov looked thoughtful.

"I'd give that a little time," Subaru suggested. "Time is definitely on our side. I have an appointment to talk to some of the Patriarchs in a few days. If we can win them over then the Princes won't have any choice but to come to the table."

"I don't give you good odds of convincing them, Lord Subaru," Gustov warned him. "I know those men. They don't change their minds."

Subaru shrugged. "Nothing to lose by trying. I'm only wasting my breath and I got plenty of that."

Anri laughed. "Alright. We'll give you a few days to try and work your magic and then we'll talk to the princes."

Anri got up and left the room and the men followed her.

"Oh. Patriarch Gustov," Subaru said with a friendly smile. "There was something I meant to tell you."

"What's that?" Gustov asked as Radu and Anri walked away into the hall.

"Stop sending Shadows to follow me," Subaru said smiling.

Gustov didn't change expression. "I don't know what-"

"The poor girl had a nasty accident," Subaru said sadly. "I took a shortcut through a mabeast lair and... well, you know. If only I'd known she was there, I could have warned her."

Gustov frowned and his eyes glittered. "What exactly is your business here?"

"My business is my business," Subaru said bluntly.

"Not when you have this much influence over my granddaughter."

"Maybe you should talk to her about it then."

"You've been in Gusteko for a matter of weeks," Gustov growled. "And in that time you've broken centuries of Gusteko power-structures apart. And all done to place my daughter on a throne that hasn't existed since nearly the time of the Great Cataclysm. And I keep wondering why."

"I like Anri," Subaru shrugged, surprisingly himself that he wasn't lying. "That's all."

"Why do I not believe you?" Gustov said in a deathly whisper.

"Because you're a suspicious old man," Subaru said helpfully. "Because you believe that nothing is free and no act is truly altruistic and the more an act *seems* to be altruistic the more suspicious it is."

Gustov glared down at him. "I lost my other son several years ago. He perished in battle with his wife and queen. Their children and Radu are all I have left. And I watch threats to Anri very carefully."

"Yeah except Malcolm Griest," Subaru yawned. "That one seemed to have slipped by you."

Gustov's face twisted in fury. "Make no mistake, boy. I will find your secret. I can promise you that."

"Well, don't send anyone after me that you really care about," Subaru said with a smile like a drawn blade. "My secrets are mine. If you want to learn them, there's a high price required. And it's paid in blood."

Gustov glared at him.

Subaru waited a moment and then walked away, dismissing him from thought.

Subaru quietly opened the door to the room he shared with Emilia.

Emilia was sitting quietly on the bed.

"Hey, Subaru," She murmured with a broad smile. Emilia's eyes were still foggy but the black marks that had crept up to her neck were beginning to fade.

Subaru pretended to be annoyed. "Ugh. You always know it's me! No matter how I try to change my walk, you recognize me!"

Emilia giggled. "Well, I know you so well!"

"I brought you some more *Azoth*!" He said cheerfully. Subaru looked around the room. "You're in here all alone?" He asked, irritated.

"I haven't been alone for long," She reassured him, taking and drinking the purple liquid. "Petra stayed with me all day. I told her to go relax because I knew you'd be here soon."

Subaru slid onto the bed beside Emilia and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry, Mili. You must feel so bored cooped up in here all day," He murmured.

"It's not so bad," Emilia shrugged. "With Petra and the other maids around, I have plenty of company. Even Senko visits me regularly."

"That's nice of her," Subaru commented.

Emilia gave him a shy smile. "Also, I have a surprise for you, Subaru."

"What's that?"

Emilia drew herself up proudly. "Petra took my wheelchair outside today!"

Subaru gasped. "Really?!"

Emilia nodded with a huge smile. "We were only out in the garden for a few minutes, Subaru but I made it outside! That's a big thing for me!"

"That's huge!" Subaru said, wrapping his arms around her. "Oh man. We need to celebrate. Maybe I'll ask Niobe to bake a cake..."

"Just promise me you won't ask Petra," Emilia cautioned.

"*Still*?! I thought Niobe was teaching her how to cook!"

"I believe she is trying. Almost everyday she tries," Emilia sighs. "I can smell the smoke from up here..."

"Well, we can't all be great chefs," Subaru shrugged. "Mili, I'm so proud of you. I know you must have been scared to death when you were outside-"

"I was *terrified*," Emilia admitted with a shudder. "But I kept pushing myself. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life as a bird in glass cage that you need to protect. I'm going to help. You'll see."

"Gilded cage," Subaru corrected.

"Huh?"

"The expression is bird in a *gilded* cage."

"Oh."

They were both quiet for a moment.

"Anyway," Subaru continued. "I wanted to ask. Did you get any sun while you were out there? You told me that the sunlight striking those black marks hurt you."

"Not as much anymore," Emilia smiled. "The marks fade a little more with every drink you give me. I'm really getting better, Subaru. I can almost make out your face!"

Subaru grinned and he held her closer. "Really?"

"Almost. Your face is really blurry though. Actually, it's kind of an improvement."

Subaru pretended to be mad and poked her side.

Emilia giggled. "Do you know what's for dinner tonight?"

"I didn't ask," Subaru replied. "I just told Niobe to bring us up some plates when she can. I only hope that it's not mutton again..." Subaru made a face.

"You don't like mutton?"

"I'm fine with mutton. Just not three times a day," He gagged. "Gusteko needs a better favorite dish."

Emilia chuckled. "Subaru," She whispered. "How long are you going to be home after that trip to Pardoche?"

"For a while!" Subaru said cheerfully. "I'll have meetings and all that usual garbage but I'm not planning on another overnight trip for a good long while after that."

Emilia snuggled against him. "I'm glad. I know that you're extremely helpful to Anri and that we need to help her after everything she's done for us... but I miss you when you're gone."

Subaru gently kissed her temple. "I miss you too. Constantly. But it's almost over. The northerners are coming to the last gasp. The war will be over in a few months and then you and I will have nothing better to do than sit around and read everyday."

Emilia smiled up at him. "I hope you're not too tired. I want to read *a lot* tonight."

"I'll manage," Subaru replied. "How far ahead did you get in the book while I was gone?"

"Nowhere. That's *our* book," Emilia said firmly. "I waited for you to come home to keep reading."

Subaru's eyes got a bit watery. "You didn't have to do that..."

"Of course, I did! So after dinner you had better be ready! I want to find out what happens when Sophia finally meets the Devilish Count!"

Subaru thought about it. "I'd bet they probably end up having sex," He said matter-of-fact. "Really awkward sex too. She'll push him away at first and then cry out that she hates him. Then she'll surrender to her passions and they'll make passionate love until she becomes a whole new woman. Then in the morning she'll say that it was all a mistake and that she still hates him. What do you think? Am I close?"

Emilia grabbed her pillow and started beating the laughing Subaru over the head with it. "Never mock *Sophia and the Ruby Princess!*" Emilia laughed.

The door opened and Niobe walked into the room holding two trays of food. Her eyes were baffled as she took in the scene. "Excuse me, Masters, am I... interrupting something?" She murmured.

Emilia blushed.

"Not at all, Niobe," Subaru replied calmly. "Grab a pillow and jump right in."

Emilia hit him with her pillow again.

"So what do you think?" Subaru asked. He sat in a small conference room in the Basilica at Pardoche with five Patriarchs in red robes. They each had at least one secretary or assistant with them and they all glared at Subaru with palatable hatred.

They had never met before but the Patriarchs had entered the room looking at Subaru as if he was the scum of the earth. The fact that he was a foreigner and also one of Prince Kairei's advisers was enough reason by itself for them to despise him. His ludicrous request for the Patriarchs was just icing on the cake. However, the fact that

he had the unmitigated gall to bring a small girl to the meeting was completely beyond the pale and established that Subaru was not even taking the meeting seriously.

"I think that you're an absolute fool," Patriarch Uvon muttered.

There was a murmur of agreement.

"You know, you do get that accusation a lot, Subaru," Meili commented.

Subaru shrugged. "Fair enough."

Uvon shook his head in disbelief. "Did you *really* come here expecting us to agree to appoint Kairei Queen?"

"I had my hopes," Subaru admitted.

"There hasn't been a secular Queen in Gusteko since House Griest lost the throne centuries ago! And you think that we're going to hand the title to House *lthil*?"

Subaru considered the question for a moment. "I think that you don't have a lot of choices," Subaru said bluntly. "Thanks to Subata, the peasantry all across the country are howling for your blood. The northern provinces are too exhausted to defend you and House Griest won't bother helping until and unless Kairei tells them to. That leaves you with some pretty narrow options."

Uvon took a deep breath. "I will *die* before I see a mutt like Kairei on the throne!"

Several Patriarchs murmured in agreement.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, it's your prerogative to make that choice. But if it might change your minds, I brought you all a little present."

Meili jumped up and handed each of the Patriarchs a small pouch.

Uvon stared at Subaru in astonishment. "Are you trying to *bribe* us?"

Subaru just gave them a friendly smile.

The Patriarchs looked suspiciously at Subaru as if suspecting they were the butt of some joke as they opened their bags.

As soon as he did, Uvon gasped. "These are my prayer beads!" He said in a choked whisper. "I used them just last night! I couldn't find them this morning. You *stole* them from my room?!"

Meili gasped. "These are *yours*?!" She said in astonishment. "That's amazing! We just found them on the street today. By complete coincidence!"

"Then why did you give them to us?" Uvon growled at Subaru.

Subaru shrugged. "Well, they're church stuff. You're church people. We just thought that you would like them," He said pleasantly.

"We didn't have any *idea* that these were yours, Mister. Honest." Meili said, her eyes huge and her voice innocent.

Uvon scowled. "Are you *threatening* us?"

Subaru looked shocked. "Threatening you? I don't remember threatening anyone. Do you, Meili?"

"Oh no, Subaru," She said firmly. "We were *very* good today."

"Yeah. Especially for us!" Subaru laughed.

Meili laughed along. "Yeah. Usually we do threaten people when they're dumb enough to tell us 'no' but we haven't threatened anyone today."

Subaru smiled. "Glad that we cleared that up," Subaru said and Meili nodded cheerfully.

Subaru looked at the Patriarchs who held their beads in trembling hands. "Anyway, we'll just show ourselves out. Kairei's coronation comes up for a vote this afternoon. Remember to vote your conscience. I hear it's a silent killer."

Subaru and Meili walked down the steps from the towering Basilica. "Well, that went well," He mused.

"That was fun!" Meili giggled.

"Yeah it was," Subaru admitted. "Remind me to do something nice for Elsa. I still can't believe she pulled this off without getting caught."

"That's my Big Sis!" Meili said proudly.

"That was a beautiful story," Emilia sighed, her eyes still foggy like a frozen lake.

"I liked it too," Senko said, putting the finished book down. Senko sat at a table and Emilia sat beside her in the wheelchair.

Senko was a regular guest at the house. At first she had just come to deliver reports and attend meetings with Subaru. However, one time when she had come for a meeting, Subaru was late getting home because of dealing with some other business. Petra had been rolling Emilia's wheelchair down the hall and they had met Senko.

Emilia, wishing to be a considerate host, apologized for her somewhat scatter-brained husband and invited Senko to join her for tea.

Senko, overcome with curiosity, agreed.

Subaru came home a few hours late and, after apologizing for his tardiness, they did have their meeting. But Senko also spent a very enjoyable afternoon with Petra and Emilia and she took to visiting Emilia in the manor when her duties allowed.

"Are you leaving now?" Emilia asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry, Emilia but my mother is throwing a party tonight for a variety of important guests and I offered to help," Senko said, standing up.

"Oh. Is Subaru going?" Emilia asked in a suddenly somber voice.

"I don't believe so," Senko said after a moment's thought. "I believe he and Miss Meili are still off negotiating in Pardochele right now."

"He is. But he's supposed to be back sometime tonight. Anyway, give your Mother my regards," Emilia said quietly.

Senko gave a slight bow. "I most surely will," She said, walking out of the room.

"Senko," Emilia called out.

The kitsune stopped.

Emilia took a deep breath and rolled after her a bit. "Lady Senko, I have a question for you. And... I'd appreciate you being completely honest with me."

Senko hesitated. "Alright," She said, her tail twitching.

"Are you sleeping with my husband?" She asked calmly.

Senko started. "No, Lady Emilia!" Senko said. She considered her next words for a moment but if Emilia asked her to be completely honest, then she would do so. "I *did* make the offer when I first came into his employ but he declined."

Emilia sighed. "Maybe I should have a talk with him about that," She murmured.

"A talk with... Lady Emilia, why would you *want* me to sleep with your husband?" Senko asked in disbelief.

Emilia scowled and hit her thighs with her fists. "I can't even *fee* my lower body much less move it! I can't... do anything with Subaru right now," Emilia whispered sounding ashamed.

Senko made an awkward expression. She cautiously cleared her throat. "Err. Lady Emilia... you... *do* know that there are... numerous ways to bring a man pleasure without... requiring your lower body, yes?"

"Really?!" Emilia asked excitedly. "Like what?!"

Senko bit her lip, uncertain if she wanted to laugh. "Um. I could... walk you through a few ideas tomorrow if you wish, Lady Emilia."

"Yes! Thank you so much, Lady Senko!" Emilia said gratefully.

"It's my pleasure, Lady Emilia," Senko said, bowing and slipping out of the room. Her last view of Emilia was of her rocking excitedly in her wheelchair, a happy smile on her face.

On the bright side, at least I can finally tell Mother that all those years of courtesan training have come in handy at last...

A week later, Argus an Craite, Patrick an Brokvar, Vlad an Voivoide and Donar an Hilde sat in a small conference room in Kocytos. They'd come here for a meeting with Princess Kairei to hopefully resolve the war and the Princess was late.

The four princes fidgeted but no one seemed inclined to talk with each other. They were all angry and frustrated. The war had tested each of them and their alliance. Argus had broken off from his former allies Patrick and Donar whom he believed were too cowardly to attack at a disadvantage and bring the war to a speedy conclusion. Argus had joined forces with Vlad in attempting to harass the forces of Siros but with only half their forces, they did not have the numbers to achieve success. They had been beaten back with significant losses.

Meanwhile, Patrick and Donar were working feverishly to try and get a defensible supply line to the Siros front. Unfortunately, the sheer amount of manpower necessary to ensure that the goods for the armies weren't stolen, inexplicably devoured by mabeasts, or simply disappeared was enormous. Worse, the peasant rebels were also fighting to seize whatever supplies they could. Even finding men brave enough to be willing to make deliveries at this point was a huge problem. After enough wagons had been destroyed by mabeasts, merchants simply refused to bring the goods. Instead Donar and Patrick had been forced to use soldiers to bring the goods, accompanied by escorts in force. This raised the price for each good that the army actually received to a ludicrous height.

The silence drifted on and as the wait continued with no foreseeable end, the Princes' tempers worsened. This delay wasn't an accident. The Princess wasn't just late, she was forcing them to wait on *her*. This was a deliberate attempt to show rank before the summit even started.

Vlad pushed away from the table and was about to storm out of the room when the door opened and Subaru walked in.

"Good day, gentlemen," He said cheerfully. "I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

The princes gaped at him.

Donar, the wily old statesman, recovered first. "We were under the *impression*," He said in a near growl, "That we were coming here to enter into negotiations with Princess Kairei. We expected to be negotiating with our *equal*."

"I know that," Subaru agreed, sitting down. "The problem is, her Majesty *isn't* your equal. Really, the sooner you all get that through your heads, the better off you'll all be."

The princes all scowled at him. Vlad reached for his battle-axe only to discover that it wasn't there. All of the men had been prudently disarmed before attending this summit.

"Is there any point to this meeting or does Kairei simply want to waste our time?" Vlad demanded.

"There's a point," Subaru assured him. "This is the part where you all surrender," He explained.

The princes were struck speechless.

Subaru sighed and pushed back from the table. "Now, I'm sure you're all ready to pitch a fit, shouting and making demands and protests, and all that bullshit, so let me boil this down for you. Next month, you're all going to kneel before Kairei and make your vows of fealty to the Queen in the Basilica at Pardochele."

Donar had been prepared to throw these absurd demands back in Subaru's face until a single word stopped him cold. "The... Basilica?" He whispered.

Subaru nodded. "Yeah. The Gusteko Holy Church has seen the necessity of backing the Queen's claim. She *will* be crowned next month," He mused.

"That's not possible," Donar gasped. "You're lying..."

"Holy King Gillecomgain isn't even dead!" Patrick objected.

Subaru chuckled. "Kairei isn't being appointed 'Holy King.' She's being crowned as Queen of Gusteko. There won't be another Holy King. Or if there is, he'll control the Church and nothing else."

"The Hierocracy would never accede to that," Argus shouted.

"The Hierocracy is bordering on irrelevancy," Subaru replied in mocking voice. "Individual parishes all over the kingdom are now refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Hierocracy. Not to mention all the churches in the north being burned by rebels while your armies are too busy running in circles to stop it. Peasants and town people all over Gusteko are fed up with the Hierocracy telling them what to do and then refusing to follow its own rules or even protect them from rampaging armies. The Hierocracy has agreed to endorse Kairei. They're hoping by the time Kairei dies, they'll be strong enough to claw their authority back. Personally, I wouldn't count on that but hey, it's good to have dreams."

The princes were stupefied.

Subaru stood up and gave them a sly grin. "Each one of your provinces is completely exhausted. Thanks to Griest and Kairei's embargoes, your economies are in the tank. Your armies have emptied your treasures, depleted your morale, and turned the peasantry against you. Last time I checked, all *four* of you were facing a different peasant uprising in your own province."

Donar scowled at Subaru. "You are very well informed," He growled. "I keep wondering how the peasants are getting so many weapons..."

"Personally? I'd guess smugglers," Subaru replied after a moment's thought. "The embargoes have given smugglers opportunities to make obscene profits. Selling weapons doesn't seem to be out of the realm of possibility."

"*Cheap* weapons. They're selling them cheap," Donar said, gritting his teeth. "In fact, for the peasantry to have bought so many weapons, some interested smuggler must be practically *giving* them away..."

The princes all glowered at Subaru.

He smiled back. "Next month at the full moon, Kairei will be crowned Queen. You *will* all be there to offer the traditional oath of loyalty. Those who do not appear will be treated as in rebellion by her Majesty and then *her* army will cross the border into your provinces. And given how tired and frustrated your soldiers are, that will not go well for you. Any questions?"

Argus snorted. "Just tell Kairei to remember that it isn't *her* that mocks us but her advisers! Kairei is a foolish girl who would be nothing without wiser men pulling her strings!"

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" Subaru said sweetly.

Argus was silent.

Subaru smiled. "See, she *does* mock you. That's how impotent you are, Argus. You don't dare insult her to her face because, even if you are right, if you hurt Kairei then her allies *will* hurt you. And you know that. The reason *why* you're afraid of making Kairei angry is irrelevant. Just remember that you *are* afraid of her and we'll get along just fine."

Subaru held their gaze for a long time until something subtly changed. The fire burning in their eyes began to flicker and die down. They were all too old, too tired, or too smart not to know when they were beaten.

Slowly, the princes bowed their heads sadly.

"See you next month," He said cheerfully, walking out of the room.

12 months later

"...And our earnings appear to be up five percent this quarter," Koi murmured. Cynthia, Koi, Subaru, and Farouk sat around a small conference table in a dim room at Koi's mansion. Subaru had dispensed with using shadows to mask who he was at this point. Every member of the Coins in the world recognized him as their effective leader. While the Tong had never sworn official loyalty to him as the King of Shadows, everyone knew who truly held the power.

Subaru nodded. "Cynthia?"

Cynthia sighed. "Vollachia has cracked down on the drug trade and they're working hard to burn the fields we cultivated with our drugs. This has severely cut into our supply."

Subaru scratched his chin. "Funny. I would have thought that with a war with Lagunica going on that Vollachia would have been too busy to worry about the drug trade."

Cynthia sighed. "I don't know why we got their attention so suddenly but until we can find a new source of supply, our profits from Stregno, Black Root, and other herbs will be crippled."

Subaru glanced at Farouk. "Speaking of which, do you have an update on our special project?"

"Special project?" Cynthia asked.

Subaru nodded. "Growing drugs in Vollachia, despite the long growing season, is proving just too complicated," Subaru said dismissively. "The Coins' presence in Vollachia isn't strong enough to protect our crops at the moment. Therefore we're planning to move our farms to Gusteko where we can isolate and control our production."

Cynthia cocked her head in confusion. "Um, forgive me, Subaru," Cynthia murmured. "But nothing that we sell can grow in Gusteko..."

Subaru smirked and turned to Farouk.

Farouk cleared his throat. "We've harvested our second crop of Black Root at the experimental 'greenhouse' you created, Master. It... smells much better," Farouk said with a laugh.

Subaru chuckled.

"Smells... better?" Cynthia echoed in confusion. "How are you growing Black Root in Gusteko?! The plant is tropical."

Subaru smirked. "Under my direction, Farouk and your man Alex that you lent us, have been engaged in a pilot program to cultivate Black Root on the Gal'Gath-thon Plateau. It's remote, isolated, has access to a staggering amount of sunlight and the hot springs provide free and easy access to heat all year long."

"Aren't those springs supposed to be poisonous?" Koi objected. "I've heard that they reek of rotten eggs."

Subaru nodded with a pained look on his face. "Yeah. There's a lot of sulfur mixed into the water, not to mention the fact that the water is close to boiling temperature. That's how we lost our first crop. I tried using the hot water from the springs to heat the greenhouse directly. It worked but after the harvest, the Black Root all stank of rotten eggs and we couldn't get the odor out. My bad. Anyway, now we don't use the spring water to heat the greenhouse directly. I've invented central heating. We use the boiling water from the springs to heat up a tank of oil and use that to circulate heat through the greenhouse. So, no more odors."

Koi and Cynthia shared a confused look.

Farouk cleared his throat. "For the record, Master, Alex was absolutely baffled by your instructions but he followed them closely. There's *no* soil nurturing the plants and barely any water being used. He has no idea how the crops grow at all, let alone so big and so fast-

"It's a technique pioneered a few centuries ago by a woman named Daphne," Subaru explained. "She discovered a means to literally *double* the production of current crop lands using a science called hydroponics. Unfortunately, Daphne wasn't very good at communicating or expressing herself to regular people. After listening to her talk for a few hours, the local farmers walked away thinking that she was advocating some strange kind of religious observance, not helped by the part where she urged them to save their urine and then boil it..."

Farouk gave Subaru a strange look. He cleared his throat. "...Anyway, as per your instructions, we've saved all the urine from the workers on site," Farouk murmured. "We boiled it dry and mixed the remaining... whatever that white salt is called, into the water that feeds the plants. We also added the ammonia that you brewed for us and the um... what did you call it, 'lime sand?' Anyway we mixed all that together and fed it to the plants."

"What's the result?" Subaru asked.

Farouk hesitated. "Well, I don't know if Alex knows what he's talking about but-

"Alex is one of my best growers," Cynthia cut in. "If he says something, you can believe him."

Farouk shrugged. "Alright. Anyway, Alex claims that if this growth rate holds steady, we ought to be able to cultivate 50% more crop in less than a quarter of the space than he's used to. Plus there's no need for a fallow season and the crops can be grown all year round."

Cynthia gasped.

Subaru chuckled. "I'm going to call this experiment a success then," He mused.

Farouk nodded. "One thing though, Alex wanted me to tell you that the water is getting too... 'alkaline,'" Farouk fumbled over the unfamiliar word. "And that's reducing the plant yield. He wants to know-

"Tell him to boil the smelly, spring water and take the yellow salts left over when it evaporates," Subaru said immediately. "Mix them into the water we feed to the plants. It'll counter the process of the lime and the ammonia."

It was clear that Farouk had no idea what Subaru was talking about but over the past year, Farouk had gotten used to following orders he didn't understand. "I'll pass that along," He promised.

"What about the other greenhouses?" Subaru asked.

"Other green houses?" Cynthia asked.

Subaru glanced at her. "A few weeks ago, once we were pretty sure that this idea was going to work, I *bought* the Gal'Gath-thon plateau," Subaru said bluntly. "It was amazingly cheap."

"Not so amazing," Koi replied. "Most people don't want to live somewhere that stinks of rotten eggs."

Subaru shrugged. "Anyway, we own the entire territory and can use it for production. Farouk has had the Gusteko craft guilds working nonstop producing our materials for the greenhouses. How long until they're ready?"

"We should have enough greenhouses to completely match Cynthia's current supply in ninety days," Farouk replied. "And we have another group of greenhouses already under construction. We should be prepared to triple our current production of herbs inside the year."

Subaru frowned. "No. We don't want to do that. If we produce that much supply, the price will head for the basement. We'll just use the greenhouses to duplicate our current supply and then fine tune it as demand fluctuates. We'll use the additional greenhouses to produce fruits and medicinal herbs for Senko's company. It will help launder our profits anyway."

Farouk nodded.

"Cynthia," Subaru said.

Cynthia snapped out of her reverie. "Yes, Subaru?"

"Ninety days is your timetable. Coordinate with Farouk," Subaru instructed. "I want to have enough manpower and supplies to bring those greenhouses into full operation at that time. Pull your people out of Vollachia for now. There's nothing down there worth fighting over anymore. I've been hearing through the grapevine that Vollachia is likely to

have bigger problems to worry about than us in the next few months and we'll slip back in once they're distracted. Meanwhile, the greenhouses will give us all the product we could ever need." He looked more closely at Cynthia. "Are your coffers holding up alright?"

"...Why do you ask, Lord Subaru?" Cynthia asked suspiciously.

"You're having a lean year," Subaru said with some sympathy. "It happens. But your divisions are very profitable. Once we get your people set up in Gusteko, your profits will surge. Let me know if you need a bridge loan until then. I don't want you to cut personnel or equipment. Letting your division shrink due to this temporary disruption would be a waste of everyone's time and money."

Cynthia nodded.

"Anything else?" Subaru asked all assembled.

Nobody said anything.

Subaru shrugged. "Alright, nothing heard. Talk to you all next month," He said, standing up.

The other mob bosses stood as well and started to leave.

Subaru found himself walking beside Koi as they departed. "I assume that smuggling from Gal'Gath-thon will be manageable?" He asked.

Koi nodded. "It's in the middle of nowhere and close to the border of Kararagi and Lagunica. Smuggling the goods should be trivial."

"That's what I like to hear," Subaru replied.

"Lagunica is still reeling from the Vollachian offense in the southeast," Gustov said.

Subaru, Anri, Radu and Gustov sat around the conference table. Radu had pressured Anri to wear a much fancier crown since her coronation but since she was still growing into it, it fell down over her eyes a lot.

Radu looked speculative. "This might be a good time to attack Lagunica," Radu mused. "Lagunica can't fight a war on two fronts and we could reclaim Ganaks and the territory we lost to Lagunica centuries ago."

Anri frowned. "We just negotiated some very favorable trade agreements with the dragon kingdom," Anri objected. "I'm not thrilled about jeopardizing that."

"It's also a bad idea politically," Subaru said. "Lagunica is already on the back foot in this war. If Gusteko attacks from the north while Vollachia pushes in from the south, then Lagunica is simply going to implode. No matter how much territory we gobble up, an emboldened Vollachia is still going to be right on our southern border. And the disruption in balance between the nations would likely kick off a general war which I don't think any of us want."

"No!" Anri shuddered.

"Ganaks is a prize that can't be overestimated!" Radu argued. "It was the original capitol of Gusteko until House Griest lost it and with it their throne. Anri, you recovering the city would solidify your legacy and silence any objections to you as the rightful queen!"

Anri hesitated.

"I think we should take a different approach," Subaru replied. He sat up straight. "Let's offer Lagunica a deal. They give us Ganaks and I'll win their war for them. That way

Vollachia is humbled, a long way from us, and we get what we want. It's all upsides."

The trio pondered that. No one in the room questioned if Subaru could win Lagunica's war.

"Lagunica is desperate, Anri," Gustov admitted. "If we made this offer, they'd probably have no choice but to accept the deal."

Subaru frowned. "Gustov... has... has there been any news?"

Gustov shook his head and favored Subaru with a cold look. He still mistrusted Subaru but he'd grown willing to do him a favor on occasion. "No, Subaru. I'm sorry. I ordered my Shadows to investigate but they turned up nothing. Nobody has seen or heard from Sir Reinhard, Miss Felt, or Master Garfiel in close to a year. The kingdom has been searching for the Sword Saint frantically without success..."

Subaru sighed and leaned back in his chair. "They can't be dead! What in the world could kill Reinhard?!"

Gustov bowed his head. "I do not know. But Vollachia was confident enough in his absence to attack and thus far, their gamble has paid off."

Subaru looked off into the distance with a moody expression.

Anri thought for a while and finally nodded. "Very well, make Lagunica the offer. But insist that they throw in the Elier Forest and the region around Arlem village as well."

"Huh?" Subaru asked in surprise.

Anri looked intently at him. "For one thing, we need a buffer. I don't want our capitol located just a few miles from the Lagunican border. More importantly, Subaru, it'll make some of your... personal concerns easier to manage."

Subaru didn't respond right away. "Thanks, Anri," He murmured.

"Hey, Mili," After the meeting ended, Subaru opened the door to their room with a sigh. "I'm back."

"Hi, Subaru," Emilia said, putting down her book and rolling her wheelchair over to him. Emilia's eyes had recovered and were now a radiant purple again. "How's Anri doing? She seemed really stressed when we had lunch last week."

Subaru sighed. He walked over to the counter and poured himself a drink of strong Gusteko liquor and downed it in a shot. He made a face and gagged. "Anri is working hard to find more chores for me!" He grumbled.

Emilia chuckled. "Why? What has she asked you to do?" She said knowingly.

Subaru slumped into a chair beside Emilia. "I'll tell you later," He sighed. "It's going to be a pain."

Emilia gave him a fond smile. "Maybe. But I bet she'll *still* talk you into it," She teased.

"Hey! Whose side are you on?!" Subaru protested in mock-frustration. "You're supposed to be *my* wife!"

Emilia laughed. "Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"No. I think Anri's dropped all the anvils on me this afternoon that she could reasonably be expected to," He replied. "Want to read the next volume from the *Crystal Princess* series until its dinner time?"

"Of course, I do!" Emilia said quickly. "I hate having to put it down!"

Subaru helped Emilia climb into bed and laid down beside her as Emilia pulled out the book.

"It's your turn to read," Subaru said.

Emilia thought about it. "Are you sure about that?" She asked skeptically.

"Probably not but who cares? I read to you for freaking months while you were blind! You're going to owe me chapters for the foreseeable future!"

Emilia poked him hard in the stomach, forcing Subaru to sit up straight with a gasp. "Be nice, Subaru," Emilia said primly.

Subaru sighed and wrapped his arms around her. "I think we may need to store up a lot of quality time over the next few weeks. I think there's good odds I may be bolting down south to stop a war..."

Emilia smiled sadly. "I'll miss you very much," She whispered. "But I know that you'll make millions of peoples' lives better by going and stopping the fighting."

"When did I become responsible for the whole goddamn world?" Subaru moaned.

Emilia kissed him. "There's nobody else I'd rather trust with this world, Subaru. It's like I've always told you: My Subaru can do anything."

So that's where we stop this little journey of 'what might have been.' I don't really plan to revisit this timeline in the future so consider the rest of this story some long term spoilers.

Once the deal between Gusteko and Lagunica had been struck, Subaru, Meili, and Elsa went to Vollachia to kill Emperor Vincent. They caught him and his guards traveling across the kingdom and attacked.

Cecilus Segmunt, the Blue Lightning was protecting him. Elsa was ecstatic to engage with the legendary warrior but she still expected to die within seconds.

Unfortunately for Cecilus, Taiyang's Endless Hunger drained his mana and reduced him from invincible to merely inhumanly dangerous. Elsa was still no match for Cecilus and he quickly managed to cut her head off. Cecilus's heart stopped when her severed neck healed before her head could even slip off her shoulders. Then Elsa resumed the attack. Cecilus slashed her stomach and stabbed her heart but without effect. By now, Elsa was armored with centuries of Stolen Years and she was nigh impossible to kill, even for a now frantic Cecilus.

At this point, Subaru and Meili had succeeded in killing all of the guards as well as Emperor Vincent. With nothing left to fight for and clearly facing an unnatural opponent, Cecilus fled.

Subaru wasn't particularly pleased with Elsa, reminding her that she was supposed to 'distract' Cecilus, not pick a fight that she couldn't possibly win and asking her if she had any idea how many Years of Vitae she'd just wasted.

Elsa calmly pointed out that Subaru had just harvested lives from more than thirty guards and assuming he got a Decade a piece from them due to using the Philosopher's Stone, she'd be back up to full strength in no time.

Subaru gave up trying to make his point. Elsa was simply Elsa.

The murder of Emperor Vincent ended the Lagunican-Vollachian war as Vollachia quickly embroiled itself in a violent civil war over who would claim the throne.

At Subaru's suggestion, once the Lagunican-Vollachian war had end, Queen Kairei formed a strong alliance with Lagunica and Kararagi to oppose Vollachian territorial

ambitions.

Lagunica had yet to put a King on the throne. Crusch had fallen in battle against Vollachia, Priscilla had mysteriously disappeared, and Anastasia had withdrawn from the selection after concluding that being King of Lagunica was no longer a sound business opportunity. Thus, it was clear to everyone in the world that, for the moment at least, Queen Kairei was the dominant political force on the continent. She relaxed Gusteko's restrictions on foreigners and demi-humans and as a result, trade in the north surged.

The hardliners and the church often attempted to gather up the resources to depose her but once Kairei had retaken Ganaks and assumed her throne in the ancient city, people across Gusteko hailed her as a Queen whose rule was ordained by the Gods and her opposition failed to find any purchase and crumbled. Her foes continued to try to remind everyone of Kairei's strange connection with the legendary Witch of the Frozen Wastes but by now, the only people who even believed in the Witch were Kairei's most implacable foes. The rest of Gusteko had come to dismiss the existence of the Witch as a rumor invented to excuse the many mistakes of the incompetent House Griest and to undermine the queen.

Lady Koi's smuggling division shrank after the annexation of Ganaks. As time went on and open trade agreements between the nations grew, smuggling became less and less profitable since most of what Koi was able to smuggle were simply drugs. Subaru elevated Koi to Boss of Gusteko and Cynthia to Boss of Lagunica as her Father and Brother had been before her. Elsa remained tightly connected with Cynthia and Koi and the Black Silver Coins knew that one only crossed the Bosses at peril of their life.

Senko's entirely, without question, law-abiding business, the 'Inari Trading Company' surged. Koi had her doubts about Senko's ability to run such a large business but Senko quickly proved herself to be a shrewd and ruthless businesswoman and her organization sank deep fingers into all four kingdoms. Many established merchants did not welcome the new competition and they attempted to extricate the newcomer from their markets by fair means or foul. However, the Inari Trading Company did not forget its sordid roots and when anyone attempted to play dirty with Senko, they often discovered that they had bit off a bit more than they could chew.

The name of the trading company struck many as odd and more than a few people approached Senko seeking to purchase kitsune pleasure slaves. Senko regretfully informed them that she did not sell kitsune but that she'd be interested in buying any that were currently on the market and that she would pay top dollar. This led to Senko becoming involved in a variety of kitsune slave trading and kitsune breeding operations across the world. Strangely, Senko's extremely high offers to purchase kitsune invariably seemed to fall through at the last minute. Then the slave sites would inexplicably get mauled by a horde of savage mabeasts, leaving no survivors. Rumors persisted, however, of a legendary haven set deep in the Elinor forest, a village called 'Kyubi' that was believed to be populated entirely by kitsune who had escaped from slavery and desired to live out their lives in peace and safety. An entire community of kitsune was a prize that many slavers would risk death to obtain. And they did. The mabeasts in the Elinor Forest were savage and few slavers who entered the trees ever emerged alive again.

During one such rescue of a kitsune breeding farm, Senko met a fox named Yako and later they fell in love. Koi never considered the humble, plainspoken kitsune remotely good enough for her daughter but she learned to keep her mouth shut. To Koi's considerable chagrin, Senko wasted no time in presenting Koi with the title of 'Grandmother,' a pronouncement that sent Koi racing to her mirror looking for wrinkles and gray hairs, features fortunately prevented by regular doses of Subaru's Vitae. As if once wasn't bad enough, Senko proceeded to give Koi another five grandchildren, all of whom absolutely adored their classy and sophisticated Grandmother to the point of being a nuisance.

In time, Koi retired from the Coins and spent her days divided between being the respected grand dame of the village of Kyubi and being a grandmother to Senko's many children. Koi remained in Senko's home until the day she died. Senko cherished the company of her mother and best friend and the pair almost never quarreled. Except on those rare occasions when Senko felt a need to remind her mother that hiring Elsa was not a reasonable reaction to her grandchildren being teased at school.

Almost seven years after Ganaks and the surrounding lands had been ceded to Gusteko by Lagunica, Petra finally left Subaru's service. She had carefully trained the local sisters Donna and Dana to replace her and she assured Subaru and Emilia that they would be well cared for. The parting was teary but Petra invited them both to the wedding.

After a multi-year long distance courtship, Petra returned to Arlem and married Lucas. They planned to travel to the Lagunican capitol so that Petra could open a dress shop. Subaru gave Petra a sizable pension in gold coins as well as a large amount of seed capital as her primary investor. Petra and Senko had grown very close over the years and Senko pulled several strings to ensure that Petra's shop exploded in popularity, convincing and bribing opinion makers to wear her clothing at public receptions.

Meili was persuaded to be maid of honor at the wedding. The now ravishing young woman earned a great deal of attention from the men in Arlem and who made it abundantly clear that she couldn't have cared less about any of them.

Following the wedding, Subaru and Emilia made a visit throughout the area and Subaru was astonished at how much respect and goodwill his name still commanded. They also encountered Rem and Ram during the ceremony. However, all four considered their prior relations to be something that belonged to another lifetime and none of them found that they had very much to say to one other.

Subaru built a summer estate for Emilia near Rixum, close to the shortest path to the elven village. Over the years, Emilia slowly came to accept that she would never break the curse on the elves. She offered the village to Senko's kitsune as a haven, thinking that her people would be happy to offer succor and sanctuary to another oppressed race. The kitsune came to revere the elven statues and they constructed a massive shrine on the hill of frozen elves. It was considered a high honor in the village to be entrusted with tending to the statues.

Subaru devoted his time between helping Anri in Ganaks to keep the world together and experimenting in his workshop in his mansion. Subaru continued to tinker in both machines and alchemy and he invented and reinvented many fascinating devices that improved the quality of life for people around the world. Subaru made an agreement with Senko to be his exclusive manufacturer and distributor of his designs and they both became fantastically rich. Subaru and Emilia had little use for money and they devoted most of it to building schools throughout the realm and trying to foster universal literacy.

Emilia regained her sight within eight months of drinking Azoth and recovered the use of her legs within two years. Sadly, she never achieved her dream of becoming a mother. The Black Dragon Blood had resulted in Emilia becoming permanently barren. This cast a pall over her life that never quite lifted.

Anri never married. She was well aware that in Gusteko, conservative as it was, if she ever married she would make herself vulnerable to a coup as a not-small subset of the populace would consider any male ruler to be preferable to any female one.

Anri did eventually have a child. After some years, she had gone to Subaru and Emilia and asked for their assistance with an extremely personal favor. Anri needed an heir and she wanted Subaru's considerable gifts to be passed on to her child. Emilia, having come to terms with the fact that she would never have a child of her own, heartily endorsed the idea. Subaru was somewhat reluctant but working together, the girls prevailed upon him.

To facilitate a legitimate heir, Anri suggested a marriage that would be in-name only. Emilia was willing to tolerate this but Subaru resolutely put his foot down and Anri had to come up with an alternative approach.

Anri was delighted the day she scandalized the conservative factions of Gusteko by claiming a consort. There were long traditions of this in Gusteko. For centuries, many princes of Gusteko had taken consorts, even women who were already married to other men, with said man's permission or without it, and used them for procreation or recreation. Anri, however, was the first woman in history to demand this privilege, a fact which amused her greatly.

The princes were livid both about Anri claiming this privilege and also that she dared to choose an untitled foreigner for the role instead of a more respectable option. They hoped to make hay out of this scandal but Prince Donar, grand old man of Gusteko politics, calmly explained to them that Anri had outsmarted them and that was that. By choosing a consort who was an untitled foreigner, Anri had made her assassination completely unthinkable. If Anri were to die, then her offspring would take the throne and until they were grown, by law, Subaru Natsuki would serve as regent. If Anri were to die childless, then Subaru Natsuki, a foreigner and a man of common blood, had good odds of being crowned king simply to avoid a civil war.

In essence, the princes were helpless about this situation and could do nothing but accept it.

Once the proprieties of Subaru's consort-status were resolved, Subaru, Anri, and Emilia spent the night together.

Subaru had occasionally fantasized about having a three-way but in practice he found the experience to be fairly awkward. No one quite knew what to do that night but they managed. The night was not especially erotic or romantic but it was warm and fondly familiar and the trio got through the night with a great deal of cuddling.

A few weeks later, Anri knew that she was pregnant. The experience that they had shared would never be repeated but all three thought back on the moment with fondness.

Emilia and Anri both thanked the other profusely for allowing them to be involved in the matter, Emilia for offering Anri a worthy donor for her heir and Anri for giving Emilia the chance to have a child to love, even if just as a doting Aunt.

Nine months later, Anri gave birth to a healthy baby boy that after great discussion they named Perseus at Emilia's insistence.

Subaru and Anri were often frantically busy with their responsibilities. Although they made as much time for him as they possibly could, Perseus spent most of his time growing up with his 'Auntie' Emilia who spent every moment possible with the boy. One night, Perseus confessed that he wished Emilia was really his mother, a comment that made Emilia's heart want to burst from both joy and sorrow.

Emilia calmly explained that she had also been raised by a woman who hadn't given birth to her because her mother had been... unable to raise her. But this just meant that Emilia had two mothers who loved her very much and she encouraged Perseus to think about it the same way.

Meili remained with Subaru and studied under him as an apprentice, learning about strategy and tactics. Meili would later replace Koi as the Boss of Black Silver Coins in Gusteko.

Late in her life, Meili became pregnant after a one night stand with someone she'd met at a party. She later gave birth to a daughter she named Elisa after the girl's god mother Elsa. Meili stayed with Subaru and Emilia as her delivery grew closer. Meili felt confident about her skills as a mother as she'd helped raise a number of babies over the years.

Subaru and Emilia returned home from a walk the day after the delivery to hear a crying baby and a frustrated Meili. They found that Meili was attempting to feed her newborn baby steak-cuts. It appeared that all of the 'babies' that Meili referred to helping raise were actually Guiltylowe kittens. It rapidly became apparent that Meili had no idea how to be a mother but with the help of Senko and Meili's other friends, she was learning. Elisa grew up surrounded by Senko's children. Because Elisa was the youngest by a goodly amount, they all spoiled her outrageously.

Elisa inherited her mother's Divine Blessing and ability to communicate with mabeasts and later became the fabled guardian of the Elio Forest. Subaru instructed the forest mabeasts to obey her commands and she spent much of her time patrolling the forest for intruders whom her mabeasts fell upon with great savagery. Local legend held that the Guardian was in fact an elven witch who roamed the forest clad in nothing but her long hair and riding on the back of a great Guiltylowe. She was reputed to offer the virtuous a kiss and her protection.

Elisa always found these legends very amusing.

Due to a change in this time-line that's blink-and-you-miss-it, Subaru never encountered Korë. In fact, rumors of witches in general soon died down. After a season of the Witch Cult displaying more activity than they'd shown in centuries, the Cult seemed to virtually vanish from the continent overnight. They would periodically reemerge to raid small isolated villages and carry off the inhabitants to a fate that no one cared to guess at. Even the Assassin's Guild grew silent. No one was quite sure what was happening and only a few became concerned that it portended anything ominous.

Because Elsa and Emilia never fought in Iruk, Lagunica and Gusteko never entered into conflict and the Triumvirate remained in the shadows. They assumed that now that the upstart Subaru had disappeared things would get back to normal. They were to be very disappointed.

Subaru waited for years but he never heard from Roswaal again. He used every resource he possessed to try and track down the missing mage but he never found so much as a clue. Finally, he threw dignity to the winds. He went to Ram and literally begged her to tell him anything she knew about Roswaal and the missing spirits. But Ram knew nothing, or at least was willing to say nothing, and Subaru returned home in defeat.

Subaru and Emilia never discovered exactly what had happened but they concluded that Roswaal was most likely dead and that this had put Puck and Beatrice forever beyond their reach.

Subaru pursued his dream of making Anima with vigor but with a steadily sinking heart. Eventually, Subaru became capable of producing Anima, something that he thought should have made him feel euphoric but instead left him extremely somber. Subaru and Emilia had a long talk that night and they came to the decision to abandon the plan to fix the world's memories of Emilia. With the loss of the spirits, Reinhard, Felt, and even Garfiel, there was simply no one left from their 'old lives' who actually mattered. Even Petra and Meili wouldn't have been very affected by the addition of a few weeks of memories compared to the years they had already spent together. The lovers had to accept that any chance to repair the losses suffered in their the past had escaped them and that they needed to concentrate on their future.

Shortly after Perseus was born, Subaru left Gusteko on a quest to try and discover what had befallen Reinhard, Felt, and Garfiel. Subaru was only supposed to be gone for a week but he went missing for a full three months and all the forces of Gusteko and the Black Silver Coins failed to find him. Subaru was only located when he had finally returned to Gusteko, his face drawn and haggard with fear.

He ignored everyone's questions and demands for explanations. He told no one what he'd found or where he'd been. He only wanted to hold his family close and wouldn't let go of them for a long time.

The only thing that he ever said on the matter of what he'd seen was: "It's too late. There's nothing we can do about it now. Maybe if I'd found out sooner but... There's nothing we can do about it now. We're all on borrowed time..."

So that's where we leave it. This was our little alternative time line and journey down what-might-have-been. It wasn't an unhappy life for our heroes. Although probably not the life we would have wished for them. And of course, it's likely to be much shorter than we would have hoped.

A few people expressed interest in seeing some of my alternative ideas for Arc 4 so I decided to do it as a treat when I was struggling with Arc 5. Unfortunately a lot of these ideas didn't make it into Arc 4 for a reason and I can't act like I'm especially satisfied by 'The King of Shadows.' Still, I did sink several months into it so I hope that people enjoyed this story, at least a little.

My original plan for this project was just to throw together a few discarded story ideas from Arc 4 and write them up as an April Fool's joke. I was thinking about 3 drafts and 20k words. Almost forty drafts and about 190k words later, we see that I missed the mark badly.

I originally conceived that if Subaru went 'bad' it would be for one of three reasons. Either Emilia would get badly hurt (physically or emotionally), she would die, or she'd decide that she didn't want to be with Subaru anymore. In all of these situations, Subaru could turn into a real monster once his morality chain wasn't there anymore. I think by now we've all seen that underneath Subaru's very genuine love for his wife there's also a darker and much more possessive side waiting to be unleashed.

In many ways, this narrative was the least 'bad' I could picture Subaru going. In the other two options I described, he really went dark and in some earlier drafts of this work he went very dark too.

In one of the earliest drafts, Subaru ends up being betrayed by Elsa and Subaru convinces Lye to eat her for him. Unfortunately, once Elsa is removed from Emilia's memory, a series of dominoes fall and their relationship in Emilia's memory is rewritten as much less romantic and much more founded on practical concerns. Since there's no longer any real benefit to them being together, Emilia simply tells Subaru that she's had enough of all these misadventures and asks him to leave her so that she can make a fresh start. This makes Subaru snap. There were a lot of fascinating aspects in this, so many that I decided to maybe save the concept of Emilia leaving him for a future what-if story since telling it now would require serious spoilers from the main time line.

Another draft had Subaru kill Elsa when they first meet and he 'rescues' Meili from her. Meili plays along, determined to kill Subaru and avenge her sister. Meili is the one who rats out Subaru to Zeno and later Subaru catches up with Meili who delivers him a 'reason you suck' speech where she tells him that he's no better than Elsa was. Meili has watched him kill hundreds of people without remorse and he's certainly no hero since the only thing he really cares about is Emilia. Subaru's temper snaps and kills Meili before he even realizes what he's doing and her blood gets all over his hands. This causes Subaru to have a breakdown as he's unable to escape the memories of her taunting speech and the constant need to wash his hands.

I think my favorite draft involved Capella but it was just too dark for this project. Subaru goes authentically crazy. Like Joker-level crazy. Elsa and Meili betray Subaru and get murdered by him and Emilia ends up being killed in Sanshi. Subaru manages to capture Capella and drags her back to his lab and he uses her as a resource. He keeps extracting her tainted blood and making drugs from it as if she were livestock. Subaru actually gets Capella hopelessly addicted to this drug that he refers to as 'Witch Blood.' Withdrawal from the drug is unspeakably painful and it can be fatal. As withdrawal continues, the nerves become unable to transmit signals which ultimately completely paralyzes the body and results in death when the heart and lungs become paralyzed. Unfortunately for her, Capella is immortal. So while the drug paralyzes her,

it's unable to kill her and she'd be forced to lay there, paralyzed, helpless, and in unspeakable pain until the Dragon Blood can't sustain her anymore and who knows how many centuries that would be.

Once Capella is completely addicted, Subaru sets her free, explains how his powers work so that she understands the weaknesses in Indomitable, and then dares her to kill him. She can easily kill him whenever she wishes but then she'll never get the drug again and she'll be doomed to an endless hell. Capella keeps trying to torture the recipe out of Subaru but he doesn't even seem to care what she does to him. No matter how she hurts him or turns him into something inhuman, he never says anything except to keep counting up how many days he'll delay her next dose as punishment for all this.

Subaru and Capella end up roaming the world together and Subaru constantly mocks her. Subaru keeps throwing himself into deadly situations and forcing Capella to protect him as he constantly dares her to just let him die. Capella basically becomes a broken dog who daily threatens to kill him and Subaru keeps encouraging her to do it. Subaru tortures her with lots of different kinds of drugs and mental abuse. It takes a very special situation to make me feel sorry for Capella but this draft did it!

The story was actually really creepy to write but I also really enjoyed it. I might try to rescue it for another project at some point.

Anyway, that's a few of the ideas I had for this. For this story, I really wanted to reverse Emilia's arc. Since arc 4 was all about her discovering her power and becoming strong, I decided that this story should break her and make her weak. Hopefully I didn't end up 'fridging' her. I like a lot of things in this story but this might be a situation where I feel like the whole is less than the sum of its parts. There were other stories about Subaru 'going bad' that I would have preferred to tell but they all either required massive spoilers or just didn't properly branch off of the Gusteko arc. Or maybe I'm just running low on inspiration for Subaru and Emilia right now. Two years is a lot of time to spend on the same characters. Especially when 3/4 of that time was working on the same two 'arcs' over and over again trying to make them as good as I could.

I really enjoyed some of the worldbuilding I got to do here. I enjoyed putting my own spin on Daphne, who Subaru may well meet in the main time line. Applying Gluttony to drugs and addiction just always made more sense to me than applying it to food. I'm sure that plenty of people are claiming that a lot of Daphne's attributes should really belong to Carmilla but I have a different spin on her that I'd like to do. Carmilla to my mind is probably the most intriguing of the witches and if I ever get the chance to write about her I'd like to do my own treatment there as well. I also got to do a little more world building for Kararagi which will be useful a bit later. Beyond that, I managed to do a bit of foreshadowing for future arcs.

Despite Daphne's involvement, I don't really consider this the Gluttony arc. I have another idea for that if we ever get that far where Subaru attempts to make himself 'perfect' by stealing powers and traits from others.

I'm guessing a variety of people would like to complain about my translating 'Acedia' as Despair instead of Melancholy but I did take five years of Latin and I feel more or less qualified to have an opinion on the proper translation of that word. Melancholy used to be viewed as a serious disease but today the word has more to do with a kind of listlessness and gentle sadness. Acedia should really reflect something more oppressive and overpowering, akin to major depression than what we usually refer to as Melancholy in modern times.

The other thing I need to say is that after this, I'll be taking a break for a while. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy following along on Subaru and Emilia's adventures but this has been 19 months straight of writing about them for hours everyday. They are the longest roommates I've ever had and I need to reset myself. So I'm going to be writing at least part 1 of an original story before I come back here.

Arc 5 is already about 50k words long and has a great deal more outlined and plotted. Unfortunately a wild plot line has dug into the narrative that now has me wondering if what I had originally planned for Arc 5 now needs to become both Arc 5 and 6.

I will be back and I will get Arc 5 (and Arc 6) out but first I need to do something else and free the cobwebs from my brain.

Once again, thank you so much for all the positive feedback and messages. Believe me, the only thing that makes all this stress and typing worth it is all of your enthusiasm.

***Chapter 12*: Chapter 12**

Hey everybody, sorry that this isn't a real update.

I decided to place a copy of my work on Royal Road but since it isn't a "first publish" situation they asked me to provide verification that the story was really mine.

So I added this chapter as evidence.

Apologies if I got people's hopes up.

I do have another short story on Royal Road that people can find under user HollowSong16 if anyone was interested

FYI, I'm about 60k words into Arc 5 and I'm currently debating if it will be published as one piece or if it will need to be split into two separate arcs due to its projected size.

I've been trying to work on some other unrelated projects but it's been a difficult summer for writing for me.

Hopefully the next time I get in touch I'll have good news for all of you.